

Educating All God's Children

**What Christians Can
—and Should—
Do to Improve
Public Education for
Low-Income Kids**

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In memory of my grandmothers,
Edna Goggin and Louise Jones,
who showed me the importance of serving others,
working for justice, and holding fast
to God's unchanging hand.

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Introduction

In the summer of 2009, I arrived on the campus of Princeton University to attend a faith-based conference. This particular gathering highlighted ways in which people of faith, Christians in this case, can work on “common good” issues. I came to the conference to understand how people of faith conceptualize working with the poor, in the hope of further refining the messaging for my relatively new faith-based initiative about public education inequity. After a long, sticky walk in the sweltering New Jersey humidity, I made my way to my hotel room to freshen up and then journeyed to the conference bookstore.

The makeshift bookshop! It’s one of my favorite haunts when attending conferences. The event planners set up tables and displays where speakers and workshop leaders—most of whom have written a book on some topic or another—can peddle their wares to the rest of us, who eagerly whip out our cash. As soon as I enter the space, my inner bookworm wriggles its way out; I have to restrain myself from purchasing everything in sight.

Wandering through the series of tables, I began to notice a familiar trend. Having already been on the faith-based conference

scene for a year or so, I'd grown used to seeing books on how Christians should engage on a multiplicity of "make the world better" issues: environmental justice, global poverty, hunger, malaria, HIV/AIDS, and human trafficking. But, yet again, I did not see a single book about the vast inequities in America's public education system.

I left the bookstore in a bit of a funk. I caught up with a colleague and boldly declared: "Someone needs to write a book. We need to make a compelling case that motivates people of faith to help close the academic achievement gap in public schools. There's not a single book here that speaks to what we're doing. I worry that people of faith don't see American educational inequity as a common-ground, moral issue that absolutely demands our action."

And that's where this book project began. I started talking with a few friends, coworkers, and ultimately many other allies about positioning the academic achievement gap as a moral, faith-based issue. In the long-standing tradition of "If what you want doesn't exist, then perhaps you should do it yourself," I embarked on this journey.

I wrestled over whether this book should be written from an interfaith perspective, or if I should use an exclusively Christian framework. I firmly believe in the potential of every major religious group to support common-ground issues like public education equity. My work as the founder of The Expectations Project, a faith-based organization helping to improve low-income public schools, welcomes everyone into this movement. Every religion expresses an ethic of caring for the most disenfranchised populations and strives to bring justice to all peoples. Judaism describes this as *tikkun olam*, or "repairing the world." The Muslim tradition highlights collective responsibility, particularly toward the poor and disenfranchised. Religions

originating in the eastern hemisphere, such as Buddhism and Hinduism, encourage a strong sense of caring for the most needy.

In the end I chose to focus on the Christian community in this initial book. As a Christian, I can speak personally to biblical principles about serving the poor and working for justice. My relationship with God and personal commitment to follow Christ had led me and sustained my commitment to improving low-income public schools. I understand and believe deeply in the significant power Christianity wields to draw its followers together to right our nation's wrongs and restore fairness where injustice has long reigned.

On a pragmatic level, I also recognize that the overwhelming majority of faith communities in low-income neighborhoods are churches (with a small, although growing, number of mosques associated with the largely African American Nation of Islam). Christians comprise 88 percent of religiously affiliated Americans, with a full 26 percent defining themselves as evangelical, or born-again, Christians. The numbers and the synergies uniquely exist within Christian communities.

As an African American Christian, I also respect the long-standing tradition of the Black church's role in social justice movements, including public education. While this book calls for Christians to become more actively engaged in eliminating the academic achievement gap, I do not intend to ignore those people—particularly in urban congregations of color—who have long recognized the moral injustices facing many children in public schools. African American pastors, and increasingly Latino and Hispanic clergy, have started public charter schools and private schools, and have pushed for vouchers allowing children in habitually underachieving schools to attend private and parochial schools.

While I applaud these individual efforts to obtain parity for students in poor neighborhoods, we have yet to see a large-scale, coordinated, comprehensive push for public-school equity within urban churches of color. Although this book predominantly addresses communities of faith that are less familiar or less engaged with low-income public schools, I hope that communities of color will embrace these themes and consider how we can further organize to bring much-needed change to low-performing schools.

We need to get busy, and we need everyone to join the movement.

1

A School System Deeply Divided

Notes from Detroit and Compton

I'd just boarded the five-hour flight to Los Angeles, where I was scheduled to speak at a conference. I found my way to a coveted aisle seat, which was next to an older, silver-haired gentleman. After the plane took off he turned to me and smiled the friendly let's-chat-with-random-strangers smile. Returning the nonverbal pleasantry, I took out my laptop nonetheless. Airplane time is precious, gloriously uninterrupted, work time to me. It's time when I'm finally free from phone calls, voice mails, and emails. I always plan ahead and designate specific tasks I want to accomplish on the flight.

"So . . . what takes you to Los Angeles?" my fellow traveler asked. I replied politely, but probably somewhat curtly, that I was traveling "for work." Assuming that would satisfy his curiosity, I turned back to my computer screen.

“Well, I’m going to meet my fifth grandchild. He was just born three weeks ago!” he continued with excitement.

“Congratulations!” I responded. There was a moment of silence, and I thought our verbal exchange had run its course. I was wrong.

“So what kind of work do you do?” he inquired.

Now, as much as I love my work, when I’m pressed for time I don’t feel inclined to give my impassioned, five-minute speech about why every child in America deserves a high-quality education, why our country has yet to achieve that goal, and (of course, my all-important crescendo) the three things that you—random stranger—can do to help make that a reality. So I gave him the rather cursory micro-version: “I work to help improve public education for kids in low-income communities, so they can achieve at the highest levels throughout their lives.”

Once again I mistook the lull in our conversation as a signal that we were done talking. I began scrolling through my to-do list. But my seatmate wasn’t finished.

“Hmmm . . . that’s interesting. How did you get into that line of work?” he asked.

I gave another polite and standard answer: “I suppose I’ve always been drawn to ways that I can make the world a more equitable place, so I’m trying to do that for kids in public schools.” I assumed this would satisfy him, so I smiled and shifted my gaze back to the dozens of unanswered email messages in my inbox.

Undeterred, my fellow passenger looked at me carefully and sipped his coffee. “I think,” he declared, “you must have a better answer than that. When people are called to work on a problem that huge, something stirs deep in them.”

Laughing at his candor and realizing that I wasn’t going to get much work done on this flight, I closed my laptop. “Well, yes, that’s true,” I replied. “But in my case it’s a much longer

answer.” And so our two-hour conversation began. I’m quite sure this dear man heard more about my personal journey than he wanted to know. But he was right about one thing: something (and, I would argue, Someone) had stirred me to do this work. And it started years ago.

The Culture of Low Expectations: Detroit

As my seatmate learned that day on our flight to Los Angeles, I didn’t stumble across educational inequity as an idealistic college student in search of a cause. I’d been well acquainted with it since birth. A child of the 1970s and 1980s, I was born and raised in Detroit. My father attended Black schools in segregated North Carolina; my mother was more fortunate to attend integrated schools in Pittsburgh. And they both went to college.

I was born after segregation ended. My parents, like many African Americans of their generation, had great expectations for their children’s education. My mother said it was a “whole new world” for us. They believed knowledge, hard work, and a couple of college degrees behind your name were three great American equalizers.

When I was an infant we moved into a three-bedroom, red-brick house on Littlefield Street, which had a mixture of middle-class and working-class families. While most families were African American, there were quite a few Caucasian families as well. Although certainly not wealthy, our neighborhood was reminiscent of that Leave-It-to-Beaver Americana that so many of us long for today. I rode my bike past well-manicured lawns and tall, leafy elm trees. We had annual block parties—a city tradition where families put up white and orange traffic blockades to close the entire street to vehicular traffic. Every parent on our street pooled their resources to set up exciting carnival

games. Moms and dads dispensed popcorn and rainbow-colored snow cones to every kid. My parents still have a photo of me taking a pony ride—grinning from ear to ear—during one of those neighborhood parties. My parents engaged in some crafty budgeting to ensure my dad's paycheck stretched to the end of the month, but we had a sense that we'd tapped into a small portion of the American dream.

Three years after we moved to Littlefield Street, my older brother, Jay, was set to enroll in kindergarten, and my parents had to decide where we'd attend school. Since my mother majored in early childhood education during college, she was well acquainted with what to look for when choosing a school for my brother and me. According to my mom, she and my dad knew early on that they wouldn't send us to the neighborhood school. "The teachers were doing their best, but the classes were overcrowded and the students weren't really challenged," my mother said. "Your dad and I worried that all the effort we'd put into preparing you and Jay for school would be wasted."

My mother chose to be a stay-at-home parent. She put a high value on devoting her time to us (which is a choice I now appreciate as a key part of the strong foundation my brother and I received). My father was a businessman with a national shipping company; he was in his late twenties and just beginning to climb the corporate ladder. My mom and dad had to make crucial decisions about our education within the constraints of a one-income family.

My parents explored several school options. They looked into a handful of public schools that allowed anyone in the school district to enroll.¹ Most of these schools had stronger academics than our neighborhood school, but they were miles away from our home. The Detroit area had a number of excellent private schools, but the tuition was beyond our family's budget.

After numerous school visits and intense number crunching, my parents enrolled Jay at Greenfield Peace Lutheran School on Detroit's northwest side, and I followed two years later. A modest parochial school a couple of miles from our home, with relatively reasonable tuition, ensured we could escape from the neighborhood public school. Although it wasn't the highest-performing private school in the Detroit area, the years I spent there—from kindergarten through eighth grade—propelled me ahead of the education most kids in my neighborhood received. Jay and I were fortunate to have those opportunities, and we excelled.

I think it's possible that my brother and I were destined for some degree of academic success because we had two college-educated parents (not to mention a mother who majored in education—and trust me, she had us reading before we even started kindergarten!). I certainly don't discount that, but I've also come to recognize some very tangible differences between my elementary school and my friends' neighborhood public school.

Greenfield Peace had much smaller classes than the public school. Each year I had only twenty to twenty-three students in my class, while the neighborhood public schools had upwards of thirty-five kids in many classrooms. I received much more individual attention because teachers had the luxury to provide it. I could get additional help with skills I hadn't yet mastered. Since the entire school was small, the culture had a personalized feel and a sense of accountability that helped students feel truly valued. That type of culture is much harder (although certainly not impossible) to create at a large public school.

When it came time for high school, our family faced similar choices—but the stakes were even higher. Our once-idyllic neighborhood had fallen on hard times. The economic crisis of

the late 1970s impacted Detroit in a dramatic way and spilled into the next decade. As our last remaining Caucasian neighbors moved out to the suburbs, so-called White flight was fully realized in my neighborhood; this meant that all of our local public schools were segregated again, albeit by de facto segregation.² Although our community retained some working-class and middle-class families, overall poverty increased as more and more families relied on public assistance.

While all the parents in our neighborhood still wanted the best for their children, our local public high school was woefully overcrowded, the dropout rate increased, and—on average—students' academic performance significantly lagged behind that of students in suburban schools.

Detroit did have two excellent public high school options: Renaissance High School and Cass Technical High School. Both schools required exemplary scores on a competitive entrance exam, excellent middle school grades, and laudatory teacher recommendations. Thousands of children applied annually for only a few hundred spots. Gaining admission to either school was akin to winning the lottery for Detroit parents. Everyone understood that neighborhood Detroit public high schools were nowhere near the high quality of Cass Tech and Renaissance.

I remember feeling tense and anxious as I joined children from all around the city to take the entrance exam. The test administrators led us into a large, dusty, old room at Detroit's downtown public school headquarters. Everyone tried to play it cool—as cool as a nervous thirteen-year-old could act—but we all knew the deal. This test was huge.

Waiting for my admissions decision felt like an eternity—although I'm sure it was only a few weeks. I was quite aware of the impact this decision would have on my family. My parents were in a better position to pay for a private high school by this

time, but I didn't want them to. They had paid for my education for nine years, and they sacrificed their own desires and needs to cover tuition. I didn't want them to pay an even heftier tuition bill for another four years.

I have vivid memories of the day I got my letter from Renaissance High School. I ripped open the envelope and saw the first few words: "Congratulations! You have been accepted. . . ." I literally jumped up and down, pumped my fists in the air, and ran around our house squealing like a three-year-old. We got pretty loud on Littlefield Street that afternoon. My brother had been accepted two years earlier (with similar fanfare), so once again we went outside of our neighborhood to get a quality education.

Why was Renaissance so radically different from almost every other public high school in Detroit? I believe the biggest differences were the explicit expectations and the overall culture of excellence. The standards at Renaissance were remarkably high for every student, and we were expected to meet them. Students had to maintain at least a 3.0 grade point average to retain the privilege of being a Renaissance Phoenix (yes, our school mascot was a tricky-to-spell bird of Greek mythology that rose from the ashes). While a 3.0 may not seem particularly challenging, it was no small feat given the mandatory coursework within our rigorous college preparatory curriculum. Every student had to take four years of math, science, social studies, and English, and three years of a foreign language. Our graduation requirements exceeded Michigan's standards and surpassed most affluent suburban school districts. The vast majority of students took physics, calculus, and one (if not several) Advanced Placement (AP) courses.

The teachers, too, contributed to an overall culture of excellence at Renaissance. My gray-haired, slightly goofy, fun-loving

AP biology teacher, Mr. Kline, had boundless enthusiasm for helping us discover why and how nature worked. He accepted nothing less than stellar effort. We threw our hearts and minds into his class. We even went on an overnight camping trip to explore plant life in its natural setting (which was a massive stretch for an urban native like myself). Madame Powell, my très chic French teacher, pushed me to become a more serious student in countless ways. I spoke fluent French after four years in her class (and I came to believe that you're officially fluent only when you begin to dream in a foreign language). Other teachers, many with PhDs, brought their vast subject knowledge, tenacity, patience, and high standards to Detroit's teenagers.

My high school taught me that academic excellence is contagious. Renaissance High had a unique culture. It oozed from every corner. I spent every day with seven hundred students who all had ambitious academic and career goals. Of course we also had the stereotypical cliques at my high school—athletes, party kids, artsy kids, and those who loved alternative punk rock. But regardless of the group, its members engaged in a constant dialogue about grade point averages, college applications, class ranking, and AP exam scores.

Our teachers fostered intellectual pursuits and rigorous critical thinking, simply expecting us to go to competitive colleges and to be among the best students in the state of Michigan. Period. No excuses. I felt strangely out of place if I didn't bring my absolute best to the classroom every day.

Our school also had an aura surrounding it. Throughout our city we were known as the “brainiacs.” Attending Renaissance gave me junior Einstein status among relatives, friends, and neighbors. Even if I struggled to keep up in my classes (and trust me—I had my moments!), everyone else still assumed I was a genius simply because my school address was 6565 West Outer

Drive. Not surprisingly, almost 100 percent of my graduating class went to college. Most of us attended universities that were among the top hundred schools in the nation.

Over the last few years as I've reconnected with high school classmates through social media, I've found myself surrounded by a cohort of overachieving physicians, attorneys, professors, and engineers. Renaissance High's culture of excellence—and, of course, a lot of hard work on the part of every student—propelled hundreds of its alumni to very successful and meaningful careers.

My best friend, Stacey, lived down the street and attended our neighborhood public high school—the very one that my parents had ruled out for me.³ Stacey and I were inseparable during our high school years. When I wasn't occupied with hours of homework or a host of extracurricular activities (my parents also believed in minimal downtime for teenagers), we spent pretty much every waking moment together obsessing over the hottest pop and R&B tunes, dissecting the latest cute boy on our radar screen, or simply walking to the corner store for a snack: extra-hot barbeque potato chips, Faygo red pop (a Detroit specialty that everyone should experience at least once), and a box of Lemonhead candy.

Even though Stacey and I shared everything, our academic lives couldn't have been more different. Her high school had a notorious reputation: more than half of the students dropped out without a diploma, and violent fights broke out on an almost daily basis. When I was choosing from one of a couple dozen Advanced Placement classes at Renaissance High, Stacey's primary options were low-level English classes and basic math. I can count on one hand the number of kids I knew who graduated from Stacey's school and went on to a four-year college.

One particular memory exemplifies the extent to which Stacey and I were hearing completely different messages during the school day. The summer before our senior year, Stacey and I sat on my front porch blasting the latest New Edition album and singing along with the boy band's current hit.

"I'm so nervous," I whined to Stacey. "I get my SAT scores back in a couple weeks. I took it again, and if I don't get at least 70 points more on the math section, I'm going to lose my mind!"

I distinctly remember Stacey pausing in silence as she turned to face me with a puzzled expression. "Nicki," she asked, "what's an SAT?"

I was shocked and completely silent. Regaining my composure, I carefully described the college entrance exam and why it was so important.

I'd always known that my high school was different from Stacey's, but it wasn't until that moment that I realized we were being educated for completely different life paths. My school absolutely expected me to go to college. But Stacey's school seemed to assume that higher education wasn't in the cards for most of its students. I couldn't understand why my bright, witty, talented friend wasn't considered college material. Even if her parents hadn't fully discussed college details with her, why hadn't teachers or counselors talked to her about college entrance exams or the application process? Wasn't that supposed to happen for every high school student? We both graduated from the Detroit Public School system, but we'd been equipped for two distinct futures.

Straight into Compton

I surprised my family and most of my friends—and definitely myself—when I moved to Compton, California, after graduating from the University of Michigan with a degree in English.

I had seen some eye-catching red, white, and blue banners on my college campus with the words “Make a Difference: Teach For America” and had attended a meeting to learn more about the fledgling teacher corps. My Detroit school experiences had left a lasting impact on me; also I was itching to do something “justice-y.” It seemed like a perfect fit. Somehow, Teach For America, this new and untested organization with a Peace Corps vibe, convinced me to pack up my light blue Nissan Sentra and drive from Michigan to the West Coast.

I accepted a position as a fifth-grade teacher in Compton, California. I hate to admit it, but before moving to California my only knowledge of Compton came from gangster-rap artists, like N.W.A., Ice-T, and Dr. Dre. (The 1990s rap songs were hardly a ringing endorsement of the community I would come to treasure; they didn’t portray an adequate picture of the culturally rich neighborhood where I would learn some of my most important life lessons.)

A few months after I’d begun teaching, I experienced a *déjà vu* moment that took me back to the deep truths Stacey and our respective high schools stirred in me several years earlier. Anthony, a raspy-voiced student, quite simply called me out. “Ms. Baker, why are you teaching *here*?” he asked during one of our after-school tutoring sessions.⁴ “You went to college,” he continued unabashedly. “Um . . . couldn’t you find a job anywhere else?” Apparently he’d asked a question that my entire fifth-grade class (and quite possibly their parents) had been wondering. Several students perked up and nodded their heads in agreement, murmuring a chorus of “uh-huh’s” and “yeah’s.”

I vividly remember those words from one of my don’t-beat-around-the-bush fifth-grade students. And to be honest, my presence at Stevenson Elementary School wasn’t the type of career path chosen by most of my peers. I graduated from a

highly ranked university with a degree in English. I considered law school and PhD programs before ultimately choosing to join Teach For America. I'd committed to teach for two years in a low-performing public school. I was working in an economically depressed neighborhood that was notorious for crime and high school dropouts.

I struggled to respond to Anthony's pointed question. "Well, I heard a rumor that the smartest kids in the world were at this school, so I wanted to be here with the geniuses," I said, hoping to reinforce the high academic expectations I had for my students—despite how far behind many of them were.

Anthony looked at me for a moment and then burst out laughing. He was not at all convinced. "Aw c'mon, Ms. Baker, nobody thinks *we're* smart! If they did, they wouldn't give us this broken-down school and these ratty old books. You don't even have enough paper and pencils for us!"

As a first-year teacher, I was shocked that a ten-year-old was fully aware of the implicit disparity in our country's two-tiered public education system. He wondered why someone like me—an African American who had graduated from college and had apparently "made it"—would ever choose to teach in his school. He implied that I had myriad more lucrative, and more worthy, options. Anthony scoffed at the idea that other people thought he and his classmates were intelligent. And he completely understood that his school lacked basic resources and facilities. Most disturbing, Anthony regarded society's low expectations of him as the reason why his school didn't have the necessary supplies. After all, he seemed to suggest, why would our nation bother wasting money on students who weren't smart enough to succeed in the first place?

My wise young student was pretty much on target. He identified the same equity chasm that had pricked my heart a few

years earlier when I sat on my front porch with Stacey. Anthony may not have yet grasped the broader complexities of public education in the United States, but he got the basics. He realized that something larger than himself and his own personal ability negatively impacted his education. But Anthony didn't yet fully comprehend that while his education was substandard, millions of children—some who lived just twenty minutes away from his school—received a phenomenal education. Those kids were being prepared for a very different future.

I wish I'd had the language to give Anthony a compelling response. I wish I had been able to give him any response, really. But I didn't. I simply smiled a weak grin and encouraged everyone to get back to work. I prayed that no one would ask me anything else about it. Thankfully, no one did.

But what could I have actually shared with Anthony? What words would reassure my fifth-graders in Compton? They knew something was wrong with their school, even though they weren't likely aware of the broader statistics that haunted me. More than 70 percent of the students in Compton read below their grade level.⁵ Fewer than 10 percent of Compton's kids make it to college—and even fewer actually graduate with a bachelor's degree. Compton's dismal academic achievement record and its fiscal mismanagement made it a prime candidate for a state takeover (which eventually happened in the mid-1990s). The state of California had zero confidence that Compton Unified School District could do its job.⁶

I had high hopes and great expectations for my students at Stevenson Elementary, but when I met them in September, their academic performance was no better than the rest of Compton's students. It would have been easy to write them off as another class of future high school dropouts. Most of them read well below the fifth-grade level, and unfortunately their math and

analytical skills matched their reading abilities. Almost all their families lived below the poverty line. Most didn't have access to high-quality preschool, which is a crucial building block for future school success. It seemed as if they had been doomed to fail before their first day of kindergarten.

Anthony was right. He was right because I didn't have enough basic supplies for my students, and, like many teachers, I frequently dipped into my meager paycheck to try to make up the difference. He was right because I had Spanish-speaking students join our classroom upon immigrating, but I didn't speak any Spanish. (The district office told me I'd need to make the best of it, because no bilingual resources were available.) Anthony was right because we frequently lacked sufficient working toilets, despite a hardworking janitorial team, and students often had to wait in long lines to use the only functional bathrooms in our school. He was right because barbed wire fences surrounded our elementary campus, and we experienced more than one "lockdown" that year due to nearby violence and police activity. But Anthony was right mostly because it felt as though no one else really cared about any of these deeply entrenched problems.

The Harsh Reality

Growing up in Detroit and teaching in Compton, California, solidified one of my deeply held beliefs: the United States operates two very separate and unequal public school systems. A child's home address typically determines which system she or he will experience. Almost 80 percent of public school students attend the school closest to their home.⁷ School choice programs and public charter schools continue to expand, but they still educate a relatively small percentage of students. District

regulations and state laws make it difficult, if not impossible, to enroll in a better school across town or in the suburbs. And the difference between two schools, even those in the very same district, is often huge.

The achievement gap is a nationwide epidemic. Every urban center and many mixed-income suburban and rural school districts exhibit significant academic disparities between children in wealthier communities and children in low-income areas. Every state's testing data reveal radical differences between low-income student achievement and middle-class and upper-class suburban student achievement. White students and many Asian American ethnic groups dramatically outperform our nation's African American, Latino/Hispanic, and Native American populations. Consider the following statistics:

- Eighty-three percent of Asian American and 78 percent of White students graduate from high school in four years, compared to 57 percent of African American and Latino/Hispanic students.⁸
- Thirty-seven percent of African American fourth-graders cannot perform basic math skills, compared to only 10 percent of White students.⁹

These disparities ought to prick our moral consciousness to its core. The repercussions of this academic achievement gap are devastating. Taking a longer view, we see that public school inequity means more than contrasting crumbling inner-city school buildings with shiny, expansive high school campuses in the suburbs. It goes far beyond whether or not a school offers AP calculus. It stretches further than the disturbing reality that some schools fundamentally believe all students *can* achieve, while others seem to assume that poor children are destined for failure. What's the bottom line? Public school inequity affects

what millions of students are able to do with their lives. Educational inequity profoundly impacts students' futures and, ultimately, their destinies.

Fifteen million children in the United States live below the poverty line. More than half of these kids won't graduate from high school—and those who do graduate perform, on average, only at the level of an eighth-grader. To put this in context, children from wealthier communities graduate from high school having successfully taken trigonometry or calculus. But the average high school graduate from a school in a low-income community is still unable to solve basic algebra problems. High school seniors in middle- and upper-middle-class neighborhoods have successfully deconstructed and analyzed the works of Virginia Woolf, W. E. B. Du Bois, and perhaps even Friedrich Nietzsche. But an urban high school graduate may still struggle to read Harry Potter novels.

If a student graduates from high school with eighth-grade skills, what is she qualified to do? What type of career can she acquire? And if she's lucky enough to be one of the 10 percent of children from low-income communities who attends college, will she be prepared for university-level academic rigor? Not likely.

The educational achievement gap arguably represents the United States' most blatant and chilling example of neglect. America has vast financial and human capital resources. We strive to be the land that provides equal opportunities to every child. But we have let the academic achievement gap fester in poor communities. It overwhelmingly impacts children who are already among our most disenfranchised and vulnerable. For generations, we've allowed millions of children to fall through the cracks. Year after year these students get shortchanged in public schools throughout the country. Simply put, our nation is failing God's kids.

Why Should Christians Care?

My Detroit roots and the years I spent in Compton classrooms deeply influence my passion for eliminating educational inequity. But my Christian principles play an even more important role. I still might have found my way to fifth-graders in Compton, but I've also come to realize how deeply my faith inspires me to help improve public education. My faith, my profound biblical convictions, and my sense of purpose compel me to continually work on behalf of our country's most disenfranchised children.

I remember the day that I made a decision, in my childhood church, to follow Christ. I would be heading off to college in a few months, and my pastor preached a heart-penetrating sermon about the depth of God's love. Weeping, but unsure why, I knew something was shifting. So, as was common in my faith tradition, I took a long walk down the church aisle to the altar. My pastor prayed a brief prayer with me, but I wasn't exactly sure what just took place. (I was also blubbering like an idiot, so my judgment and reason were slightly impaired at the moment.) I sensed a peace that I'd never felt before, and I wanted to understand what caused it.

I started college the next fall, and my faith commitment deepened. As with many, the first few years of my Christian journey included pinnacles, valleys, deep questioning, and moments of complete abandon. But I left college with an unshakable commitment and desire to learn more about the person of Jesus. Above all else, I sought to integrate Christ into every aspect of my life—especially when it came to fulfilling God's mission on behalf of those who have the fewest resources. I had an overwhelming desire to live out Micah 6:8 in my everyday life: "And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." I particularly

love this portion of the verse from *The Message* translation: “It’s quite simple: Do what is fair and just to your neighbor.”

And that’s still my desire today: to do what is fair and just to my neighbor. I certainly don’t get it right every time. God’s Word challenges me to examine areas where I can apply that principle more authentically. That said, my faith perspective influences me to naturally view the national disparity in our nation’s public schools through the lens of my Christian beliefs. I fully recognize and respect the separation of church and state, but that boundary does not diminish the degree to which my Christian beliefs drive me to do what’s fair and just for children in low-income public schools.

Finding the Way Forward

My husband, Alonzo, and I have three children. A fair number of our conversations focus on them, as we articulate our greatest hopes and desires for their lives. Those dreams can range from hoping they’ll finally realize the clothes hamper is actually a place where dirty clothes go, to envisioning how our kids might contribute to society’s greater good. We want them to have opportunities to achieve everything that’s possible and ultimately ascertain God’s purpose for their lives.

Alonzo and I don’t articulate anything markedly different from what all parents—regardless of their economic situation or educational background—want. I believe all parents hope that their children become well educated, have the opportunity to fulfill their God-given potential, acquire the financial means to make a life for themselves, and, eventually, to have the resources to raise families of their own.

Our public school system does not yet foster that reality for all children. The 15 million children disproportionately impacted

by the achievement gap do not have the same opportunities for success and personal fulfillment that other children do. They certainly have the potential, as we'll explore in subsequent chapters. Yet many of these children are stuck in underperforming schools, and too often that potential is stifled before it's brought to fruition.

This book explores how and why Christians have a collective responsibility to ensure that kids from low-income communities have the same opportunities for educational success that wealthier children experience. Regardless of where our own children attend school, Christians should wrestle with determining how God wants us to take care of kids who are left behind in substandard and systemically underperforming public schools through no fault of their own.

My deepest hope is that this book will challenge all of us to wrestle with long-held assumptions about whether or not all children (and by "all" I actually do mean *each and every child*) from low-income backgrounds can actually achieve at high levels. In what ways do our biblical belief systems inform our ideas about the potential of children whose parents are caught in the cycle of generational poverty? What about the young boy brought up by a single mother while his father does jail time? And what do we think of the fifth-grade girl who hasn't learned to read yet or the junior-high boy who immigrates to America and speaks only Spanish? Or suppose both parents work minimum-wage jobs that preclude them from spending time with their children? Do we truly believe all children, if given the right academic resources and support, have limitless potential?

Given the long-standing achievement gap we see in our nation's schools, I submit that our society doesn't fully embrace the idea that all children can achieve. We've consciously, or subconsciously, allowed public school disparities to go largely

unchecked for decades. Ironically, most people recognize the need to fix low-income public schools. Every politician laments the unfortunate failings of urban schools; if the topic is broached at a dinner party or picnic, most guests would agree that something isn't working. But far fewer of us are actively engaged in rectifying the problem. As Christians, we are called to fix broken systems and restore what has been lost or been allowed to decay. Sadly, we have little or no voice in the public school reform conversations and debates.

And once we come to grips with our own personal beliefs and mind-sets, what should Christians do? We have tremendous power and potential to build national awareness about educational inequity. We can offer our services (time, talents, and resources) to public school students, teachers, principals, and local community members. We can come alongside parents and community members and advocate for the transformational change necessary to give all children the education they deserve. And as we'll see throughout the rest of this book, we can learn from inspiring and informative examples of how Christians are doing just that. We can embrace and understand their efforts and use this knowledge to spark a public school reform movement in our own faith-based communities.

For the sake of Anthony, my insightful Compton fifth-grader, and the millions of students like him, I believe God is calling us to open our hearts to one of the greatest moral and ethical issues of our generation. I invite us to listen to what God's heart is saying about the most disenfranchised children in our nation, who are full of incredible, untapped potential.