



Answer Sheet

Teacher: I see the difference in educational privilege every day. I live it. I am disgusted by it.

By [Valerie Strauss](#) January 29, 2015 [✉Email the author](#)

Here is a post by a Colorado teacher who vividly explains the difference in the lives of fortunate students and the less fortunate students whom she teaches. [Her last post on this blog](#) was a nuanced look into the psyche of some students of color who live in poverty, which [you can read here](#). This public school teacher often blogs anonymously under the name Shakespeare's Sister at Daily Kos. She teaches 11th grade AP Language and Composition in the Denver area.

Here is Shakespeare's Sister newest post for this blog:

Recently, events in Ferguson and New York have reminded us there are still two very different Americas. What I wish more people were talking about is that there are two American educations: One for the affluent, and one for students living in poverty.

Many of the [reports focus on numbers](#) for free and reduced lunches, which is, some say, a "rough proxy for poverty," but those labeling it in such a way have probably never set foot in a classroom.

Almost every day, I slip food to one of my students. Both of his parents are in prison. Or, one of his parents is in prison and the other is dead. We can't quite get the full story from him. He lives with his older sister, whom he refers to as his mother because he doesn't want to explain anything. Or he doesn't live with her. He won't say where he's staying. We've attempted home visits but can never get anyone to answer the door.

A senior from a nearby high school spoke at the Colorado Association for Gifted and Talented's annual conference in Denver this past October. Poised and polished and wearing a suit, he told the assembled teachers and administrators about how he had recently received a \$25,000 grant from a company to allow him to continue to develop a thumbprint-activated gun prototype. He takes a special class in a public school—a scientific discovery class—in which he is allowed time to process through his scientifically based ideas. He works with a special adviser from a corporation that helped him set up his own corporation, and continues to help guide the research and development of his prototype. He admitted openly to taking many days off of school in order to work on his projects. He laughed it off, though, because his teachers make a special exception for him because they know he's gifted, and they know what he's working on.

My students take several days off of school also. They do it when they have to care for their brothers or sisters because their parents are working. They do it when they have to work so their family can eat. They do it when their parents are in the hospital receiving emergency medical care. Instead of a special exception, my students will eventually get a date in truancy court.

Another student who spoke at the conference, a fourteen-year-old "Indigenous Environmental Activist," is "committed to standing up and protecting the Earth, Water, Air, and Atmosphere." He attends a private school on a full-ride scholarship, and travels around the world—by airplane, I should mention—to perform with other activists, fight for the environment, and encourage other people to do the same. He and his siblings have released an album of rap songs about fighting for the health of the planet. My kids fight for the chance to break the oppressive cycle of poverty.

My student comes to school hungry every day. He wears size XXL shirts to hide what we all know is an emaciated frame. A couple of weeks ago, he used a plastic bag—stretched out to its full length—as a belt. He says he doesn't get to choose the size of clothes he gets so he has to make do with what he has. He tells me I don't have to buy him food, but I do anyway, because he needs it. He always takes it.

Why do I do it? Is it because it hurts me to see when my students are hungry, to know that they are wanting? That's one reason, yes. But another reason I do it is because, deep down, I am ashamed of an educational system that provides such privilege to some students, while willfully and purposefully denying it to others.

I am angry that when I attend a conference for gifted children—which, make no mistake, I do have in my classroom, though they do not have the same opportunities as their more affluent counterparts—I see such a stark difference between the opportunities afforded to students in affluent areas, and the opportunities afforded to students in my classroom.

6/3/2018

Teacher: I see the difference in educational privilege every day. I live it. I am disgusted by it. - The Washington Post

There has been plenty of talk about privilege lately: the difference in racial privilege, the difference in gender privilege.

There's a difference in educational privilege, too. I see it every day. I live it. I am disgusted by it.

Where there is money, there is education. Where there isn't money, there is excessive testing, lack of curricular options, and struggle. There is the struggle to give students the tools they need to fight their way through a system that is designed to hold them back from the moment they take their first breath, from the moment they try to write their first paragraph. As The Washington Post report states: "A growing number of children start kindergarten already trailing their more privileged peers and rarely, if ever, catch up. They are less likely to have support at home, are less frequently exposed to enriching activities outside of school, and are more likely to drop out and never attend college." They are, overall, less likely to succeed.

When I was at the conference, I heard confidence in the voices of the two students that spoke; their words were steeped in the self-assuredness of privilege.

Instead of self-assuredness, my teenage students' voices are already wracked with weariness.

So what do my students need, then? Access to the same funding, opportunities, and "exceptions" afforded to privileged, affluent students.

They need a society and educational system designed to actually meet their needs, instead of a society that passes laws to keep them constantly underfoot and an educational system designed to test them to death and tell them how they are inadequate instead of educating them.

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Valerie Strauss is an education writer who authors The Answer Sheet blog. She came to the Post as an assistant foreign editor for Asia in 1987 and weekend foreign desk editor after working for Reuters as national security editor and a military/foreign affairs reporter on Capitol Hill. She also previously worked at UPI and the LA Times.  Follow @valeriestrauss

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