



# The Bell Policy Center

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## Affirmative Action: Where Do We Start?

By Adrian Miller, Director of Outreach and General Counsel

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A recent statement by Gov. Bill Owens pulled me up short. "I'm for affirmative action when it is defined as everyone gets to the starting line equally," the governor was quoted as saying in response to the recent U.S. Supreme Court decision that race may be considered as a factor in public college admissions. "And then you allow for merit to take over. But I'm against racial discrimination. I think it's racial discrimination to say a child should get a head start because of their race."

Now let me get this straight. Does the governor truly believe that, by eliminating race as a factor in college admissions, we can actually achieve a system in which "merit takes over"? And what is this "starting line" he talks about—before which affirmative action is OK but after which all is supposedly equal? Forgive me, but in the real world, there's no such thing as an equal starting line and "merit" is a subjective judgment influenced by a whole range of "unequal" factors—race and socioeconomic status among them.

The governor's "starting line" certainly cannot be birth. Colorado is above the national average in the percentage of children born with a Low Birth Weight (LBW), which is significantly higher in low-income families, parents with less education, and African-American families. In Colorado, black women have the highest rate of LBW babies in the nation—some 80 percent higher than among whites or Hispanics. Numerous studies have demonstrated LBW's long-term effects on a child's health and her ability to learn and succeed academically. "Affirmative action" in this arena would mean providing more low-income and minority women with adequate pre-natal care (Colorado ranks near the bottom in funding these services, and the current fiscal crisis has made the situation even worse).

Nor can the "starting line" be when kids first enter school — not when one-third of Colorado kindergartners and first graders are deemed by their teachers academically unprepared to learn. According to the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development, "Early delays are quickly magnified as these (disadvantaged) children move through the early grades and become more likely than their more affluent and majority peers to score lower on tests of academic achievement, such as reading skill, receive special education, repeat school grades, and be diagnosed with mental retardation and learning disabilities." High quality preschool programs can boost kids' chances for success in elementary school, but again, Colorado falls short in providing this opportunity to low-income families. And in our state, as in most of the country, minorities comprise a large number of these families.

How about the third grade, the point at which kids are expected to have mastered reading? Have we equalized our kids' chances by the time they reach this "starting line"? Hardly. In fact, the gap between rich and poor, whites and minorities actually widens as reflected in average statewide reading scores.

In fact, I am hard-pressed to find any meaningful "starting line" that everyone is getting to equally. It certainly isn't high-school graduation (blacks and Hispanics are two-to-three times more likely not to graduate than whites in Colorado). It certainly isn't college admissions (Colorado is at the very bottom of states in providing access to college for low-income and minority kids)



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And what do we mean by "merit taking over"? Does that mean reliance on standardized test scores, even though they've been shown to be biased along cultural and gender lines? Even though we know that those who can afford to hire entrance exam tutors or enroll in preparatory classes can significantly boost their scores? Are these tests, so critical to the admissions process, a true measure of "merit"?

What about grade-point averages? Are these a good measure of merit—even though there is no uniform, statewide grading system? Is it fair to compare grades between a school that rewards students who take challenging courses to a school that doesn't take into account difficulty? How do we measure grade inflation? What about the kid whose parents pressure a teacher or a school's administration to change grades or class ranking so their child may be more competitive for college?

The truth is that it's not possible to put aside these and other factors—including family influence and the desire of most colleges to have a regionally and demographically diverse student body — and judge school applicants strictly on "merit" as Gov. Owens suggests. By the time a young person reaches college age, his family's socioeconomic status, the quality of his public school, and where he lives have all had a significant influence on his academic achievement. The goal of the college admissions process is to try to balance all of these factors — race among them — and make a judgment call about how well a student will succeed at a particular institution.

Nothing about the college selection process is totally fair or equal. But we dwell on race because it's an easy target and because we have difficulty accepting that the process is rife with other preferences. There are always those exceptional individuals who are able to rise above the inequities in the system. It's much easier to point to their success, however, than to address collective inequities in resources in largely minority schools, for example. Or to admit that other accidents of birth—such as wealth, legacy, familial relation, and geography—also play a role in determining who is in and who is out.

So let's be honest and admit that the answer to the question: "Is affirmative action fair?" is clearly more complex than Gov. Owens' comments would suggest. Perhaps the most crucial step to consensus on this issue will come when affirmative action supporters accept that criticizing the fairness of the policy does not necessarily make one a racist, and when opponents concede that we do not have equal starting lines and that many applicants have unearned advantages.

In the meantime, those who oppose considering race among many other variables in college admissions should be concerned about the mixed message we're sending our youth about opportunity. We are telling one segment of society that it should need no help, while others are allowed all the advantages they can get. And somehow, Gov. Owens, that doesn't seem quite fair.

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