

Education Review

Reseñas Educativas



Resenhas Educativas

April 8, 2026

ISSN 1094-5296

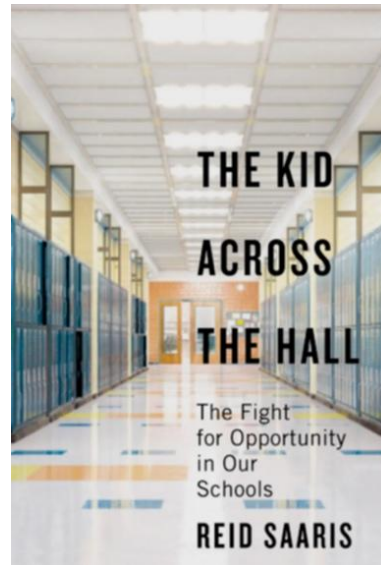
Saaris, R. (2024). *The kid across the hall: The fight for opportunity in our schools.* Redwood Press.

345 pp.

ISBN: 9781503615274

Candace Carrier
Virginia Tech University
United States

In *The Kid Across the Hall*, Reid Saaris delivers a personal and often uncomfortable exploration of education reform, race, privilege, and the limitations of opportunity. Blending memoir with policy critique, Saaris traces his journey from a child growing up alongside a foster sister who was labeled and misjudged by the education system to the founding of Equal Opportunity Schools (EOS). EOS is a nonprofit dedicated to identifying “missing” students. These missing students are described as students of color and low-income students who are capable of advanced studies coursework but are often denied the opportunity to pursue it. It is inspiring in the story of Saaris’s quest to expand access and in his own personal reckoning with the racism embedded in American schools and in himself.



The book opens with the story of Saaris’s foster sister, Erin. As a child, Saaris did not recognize that Erin was treated differently until they both underwent educational testing. Saaris was labeled as “gifted,” and Erin was labeled “mentally retarded.” While later retesting revealed that Erin was not intellectually disabled, Saaris acknowledges that his test results were likely the result of his mother’s influence, “who worked in—and knew how to work—the system” (p. 6). This acknowledgement becomes foundational to the book’s message: institutional systems do not treat children equally, and outcomes often hinge on parental advocacy, race, and economic advantage.

Saaris also recounts his lifelong friendship with his friend Jamie. He and Jamie grew up together, sharing classes until they reached high school. With his mother’s help, Saaris enrolled in advanced studies courses. Jamie, on the other hand, became entangled in drug use, and his contempt for school only grew. Saaris encouraged him to join him in advanced studies courses, but Jamie

refused. His reluctance was not due to a lack of capability, but because he did not have the same support structures in place that Saaris had. Jamie's story is not an isolated incident, but rather a lens through which Saaris examines structural inequities. The book becomes, in part, a chronicle of his gradual awakening.

Saaris graduated from high school with an International Baccalaureate (IB) diploma and attended Harvard University, studying education. Upon graduating from Harvard, he took a position as a history teacher in an under-resourced school in South Carolina. His work in the classroom led to an appointment as the advanced studies coordinator, which became a turning point in his career. Saaris then takes it upon himself to identify "missing" students—those who should be enrolled in advanced studies courses but are not. This journey exposes Saaris to the assumptions made by adults, the biased teacher recommendation process, and tracking systems that keep students of color and low-income students out of advanced studies courses. His experiences as the advanced studies coordinator led to the next phase in his life.

Saaris left his position as a history teacher and founded Equal Opportunity Schools (EOS). The organization's primary mission is to locate missing students and increase enrollment in advanced studies courses. One of the author's most compelling insights emerges in the data collected by EOS. Saaris and his team discover that students who are encouraged and supported by adults are four times more likely to enroll in advanced courses. The implication is powerful and reveals that access is not simply about a lack of opportunity, but also about the assumptions held by the adults who serve as gatekeepers. Saaris begins to realize that access might mean more than identification and enrollment in advanced studies courses.

As EOS grew, Saaris encountered resistance from school districts that either couldn't afford the fees or didn't want to disrupt existing hierarchies created by affluent parents. At the same time, internal struggle intensified as EOS employees started to challenge racist ideologies within the way EOS operates. Though EOS aims to dismantle inequities, it is itself embedded in structures shaped by white norms and racial bias. Saaris is initially resistant to these ideas, but a turning point comes when some of his former students help him confront his own white privilege. Finally, an open and honest conversation with his childhood friend, Jamie, enabled Saaris to acknowledge his own white privilege. These chapters are among the book's most honest. Saaris does not present himself as fully enlightened, but rather, he admits to the struggles that kept him resistant to change. Saaris says it best when he describes the endemic nature of racism with this "pickling" metaphor. "These patterns exist in nearly every schoolhouse in every city. It's all around us. It's in us. We're pickled in it. And no cucumber—even one on the top of the pot, poking a bit out of the brine—escapes pickling" (p. 299).

Saaris's eventual acceptance of his role in systemic racism helped him broaden his lens, not only within EOS but also in his personal life. While attending a Black Lives Matter protest in the historically redlined neighborhood where his child attends school, he realized his own part in structural inequities. For example, placing the EOS headquarters in a location difficult for Black

employees to access had unintended consequences. With the intention of providing his children with a more integrated school experience, Saaris moved his family to a more diverse neighborhood. He also stepped down from EOS, leaving it in the capable hands of a person of color already working for the organization.

The book closes with another story from Saaris's time as a history teacher in South Carolina. He critiqued a history teacher across the hall for perpetuating narratives of inequity that he found problematic. Yet his students remind him that change cannot occur if one person looks down on others. Just as he believed in his students' potential, he must also believe in his colleagues' capacity for growth. The Pygmalion effect, the idea that expectations shape outcomes, applies to adults as well (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). "The kid across the hall" is both literal and metaphorical. Opportunity and injustice exist side-by-side. Education reform requires not only identifying who is missing, but also examining who is looking for them and how they're doing it.

The Kid Across the Hall succeeds in making systematic inequalities clear through storytelling. The author's willingness to expose his own blind spots lends credibility to his story and personal evolution. Weaving data through the narrative also emotionally grounds the book while providing factual evidence. Educators, parents, and students alike could benefit from Saaris's first-hand account of passionately aspiring to solve one of the many injustices within the education system.

However, the book sometimes falls short in recognizing its own assumptions. By consistently framing advanced courses as the primary pathway to success, Saaris risks reinforcing a hierarchy that marginalizes vocational education and alternative definitions of success. While he later acknowledges that every student deserves an opportunity without mandating college, readers may wish for a more exploration and direct critique of this issue.

Ultimately, *The Kid Across the Hall* is a story about whom we choose believe in, whom we overlook, and how our expectations shape the reality of education structures. It is also a story about humility. Saaris began with the conviction that he could fix inequalities by finding missing students. He ended by recognizing he must also examine himself and the systems in which we all live. In tracing his journey from his childhood spent with Erin and Jamie to his confrontation with white privilege, Saaris demonstrates that education reform is as much about internal transformation as institutional change. The book challenges educators to ask hard questions about opportunity and about who decides how it is accessed. And perhaps most importantly, are we willing to confront the privilege that allows us to ignore justice?

Reference

Rosenthal, R., & Jacobson, L. (1968). *Pygmalion in the classroom: Teacher expectation and student intellectual development*. Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

About the Reviewer

Candace Carrier is a PhD student at Virginia Tech, where she is pursuing a degree in career and technical education (CTE). Before returning to graduate school, she dedicated 21 years to serving as an agricultural education teacher in Virginia’s public schools, building a dual enrollment welding program. In 2025, her commitment to teaching excellence was recognized when she was named the Virginia Region 6 Teacher of the Year. Alongside her doctoral work, Candace applies her expertise in CTE as an adjunct welding instructor at both New River Community College and Virginia Tech. In all her teaching roles, she emphasizes making agricultural mechanics accessible and inclusive, ensuring that students of all backgrounds feel confident engaging with technical skills. Candace’s research focuses on promoting gender equity in agricultural mechanics and understanding the unique challenges faced by rural career and technical education teachers.



About the Author

Reid Saaris is the founder of Equal Opportunity Schools, a nonprofit dedicated to ensuring that students of all backgrounds have opportunities to succeed at the highest levels. He is an Echoing Green, a Draper Richards Kaplan, and a Stanford Social Innovation Fellow, and has advised federal, state, and local leaders, teachers, philanthropies, companies, and universities on topics like justice, impact, data analysis, communications, and learning. His most challenging and meaningful professional experiences have been as a classroom teacher. His book *The Kid Across the Hall* was a finalist for the 2024 Montaigne Medal Award, an annual literary award presented to books that are exceptionally thought-provoking and designed to “illuminate, progress, or redirect thought.”



Education Review / *Reseñas Educativas* / *Resenhas Educativas* is supported by the Mary Lou Fulton College for Teaching and Learning Innovation, Arizona State University.

Copyright is retained by the first or sole author, who grants right of first publication to the *Education Review*. Readers are free to copy, display, distribute, and adapt this article, as long as the work is attributed to the author(s) and *Education Review*, the changes are identified, and the same license applies to the derivative work. More details of this Creative Commons license are available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>.

Education Review is free-to-read and free-to-publish.



Disclaimer: The views or opinions presented in book reviews are solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent those of *Education Review*.