

International Perspectives Equity in Education

Introduction | This paper is part of a series on education reforms and is not meant to be a comprehensive review of the current reform efforts in the United States. We hope this work will encourage educators and other stakeholders to spend more time reviewing domestic and international educational research, dig deeply into the real drivers of school improvement and student achievement, and work to reclaim the promise of public education to fulfill our collective obligation to help all children succeed.

Background

Equity is an inherently difficult issue to describe and is even more difficult to resolve, but it is a critical consideration for understanding why the United States does not currently hold an international advantage in education. Until the United States can truly come to grips with the effects of funding disparities, the role of poverty on classroom performance, and consistent achievement gaps, we will continue to only see limited improvement in American schools. Year after year, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has mentioned the lack of equity as a barrier to success, but these reports have not created, in the United States at least, the appropriate urgency to act.

Research indicates that among the most important factors affecting a child's educational performance are family background and environment. Gaps between the achievement of blacks and Hispanics and that of whites and Asians continue to grow, as do achievement gaps between students from low-income families and those from high-income families. The achievement gap between

high- and low-income students increased 75 percent between when baby boomers were in school and today.¹ Teachers are an important part of a student's life, but despite what some say, teachers can only mildly mitigate the effects of poverty—they cannot solve it.

The amounts of public funds the United States allocates to education are comparable to amounts in other developed countries, but funding equity remains a serious issue. The United States is highly localized in how it funds education, creating a serious variance in education opportunity among localities. Each district draws its funding from a mix of federal, state and local sources. Federal funds are, on average, 13 percent of a district's budget and are considered supplemental for designated purposes—for example, Title I funds for high-poverty schools or Title II funds for teacher training. Of the remaining resources, about 43 percent come from state sources and about 44 percent from local sources.² When revenues diminish,



state legislative priorities shift, or state equalizing formulas fail to make up the difference, the impact on local budgets becomes clear. In high-poverty areas, these funding methods make it more difficult to fund the instructional supports and trainings that are unique to lower-performing schools.

The Inconvenient Truth

The inconvenient truth about equity in education in the United States is that achievement results, when disaggregated by socioeconomic status, indicate performance outcomes that are in line with comparable countries, relative to poverty. The United States is not made up of just students with high-socioeconomic backgrounds, and, sadly, poverty plays a role in access to and readiness for high-quality education. Just this year, the U.S. Department of Education issued a report on the impacts of poverty and found that “[n]o other developed nation has inequities nearly as deep or systemic; no other developed nation has, despite some efforts to the contrary, so thoroughly stacked the odds against so many of its children.”³

The United States had the highest rate of poverty among developed nations in 2008, at 21.7 percent. On the 2009 Program for International Student Assessment results, the United States ranked 14th among OECD countries. If U.S. schools with a poverty rate of less than 10 percent were compared internationally, the United States would rank No. 1; if U.S. schools with a poverty rate of 10-24.9 percent were compared internationally, the United States would rank third.⁴ The United States has no chance to lead the world in overall educational outcomes until we address the massive inequities among our schools.

Addressing inequity in schools is the most challenging part of school improvement. Because it is politically difficult to talk about it directly, many strive to downplay the role of equity and exaggerate the role of other factors, such

as teacher quality. Although teachers are an important factor, their influence accounts for less than 10 percent in terms of influence on student achievement.⁵ Focusing on the wrong drivers makes reducing the impact of inequities extremely difficult. Overemphasis on standardized tests, the closure of neighborhood schools and escaping the problem through vouchers make for a muddled school improvement environment. With 40 percent of American students attending schools in areas of concentrated poverty, we know where the pressure points are but continue to not address the issues comprehensively.⁶

Reclaiming the Promise

Research from the world’s high-performing school systems is clear. If we are going to create systems that provide more educational equity, we must:

- *Ensure the support of local governments and businesses to actively address the crippling effects of poverty on children’s ability to learn.*
- *Recognize the importance of equity, and create programs and policies to address equity in schools.*

1. Sean Reardon, “The Widening Academic Achievement Gap Between the Rich and the Poor: New Evidence and Possible Explanations,” in *Whither Opportunity? Rising Inequality, Schools and Children’s Life Changes*, ed. Greg J. Duncan and Richard J. Murnane (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2011), 92.

2. S.Q. Cornman, “Revenues and Expenditures for Public Elementary and Secondary School Districts: School Year 2009-10 (Fiscal Year 2010),” NCES 2013-307 (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, 2013. Retrieved August 28, 2013, from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch>).

3. The Equity and Excellence Commission, *For Each and Every Child—A Strategy for Education Equity and Excellence* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2013) 18.

4. PISA rankings available at www.oecd.org/pisa/pisaproducts/pisa2009/pisa2009keyfindings.htm.

5. Dan Goldhaber, “The Mystery of Good Teaching,” *Education Next* 2, no. 1, Spring 2002.

6. The Equity and Excellence Commission, *For Each and Every Child*.

It’s time to reclaim the promise of public education—not as it is today or as it was in the past, but as it can be—to fulfill our collective obligation to help all children succeed. We have a vision that works, but we need everyone’s help: educators, parents, students, civic leaders and community members. Only by working together can we reclaim the promise of public education.

www.aft.org/promise