



Why Equity is the Key to Excellence for American Schools

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Educational achievement improved for American schoolchildren throughout the 20th century, making the United States the envy of the world. In 1910 less than 10% of the population had graduated from high school, but by 1970 four of every five Americans had completed high school. Progress was rapid and widespread because public officials and educators worked together to make sure almost all American students had access to effective public schools.

At the onset of 21st century, educators across the world are focused on ensuring high quality learning for all students. Other nations learned from the 20th century U.S. model, and many have now surpassed American levels of educational achievement by spending enough to provide high-quality teaching and a robust curriculum to all schoolchildren. Even with growing immigration and higher levels of economic inequality, for instance, Finland, South Korea, and Singapore are noted for fostering strong gains among all of their children. Meanwhile, educational progress has stalled in the United States. Wide disparities in school performance have persisted since the 1980s, and policymakers are not committing enough resources to close the gaps.

Faltering educational attainment for many children leaves the United States with a present and future workforce less prepared to succeed in an era of intense global competition. To turn things around, we must discover exactly where the shortfalls and roadblocks lie and correct them.

Excellence along with Abysmal Failure

Across the United States, there are outstanding public school systems that prepare children for college, effective citizenship, and high performance in jobs and careers. Some U.S. public schools are so good that they attract tuition-paying international students from places like China and India. But far too many U.S. public schools perform abysmally. Tellingly, more than two-thirds of national officials refuse to send their own children to public schools in Washington DC.

In her latest book, *Reign of Error*, former Secretary of Education Diane Ravitch argues that American public schools are quite successful overall. Test scores and graduation rates have never been higher in the United States for white, black, Hispanic, and Asian children. Yet low test scores and other signs of grievous educational failure persist in place with high concentrations of poverty. Schools in very poor urban or rural areas often lack the most basic resources needed to instruct and support children, especially those from fragile families.

Educational excellence for our nation as a whole requires that we support and raise the performance of all students – and that in turn means giving extra attention and support to children in areas of high poverty. We know it is possible to do what is necessary. Reforms pursued by the Harlem Children's Zone and Dr. James

Comer in New Haven have succeeded in raising educational attainment in high poverty areas by tackling the full range of problems. They improve instruction and counseling inside the schools and make supportive family and health services available in the surrounding community.

Well-Prepared Teachers are Pivotal

Other nations value teaching and it shows in their public policies. Teachers are selected from the top third of college graduates, with their university tuition covered plus two to five years of mentored preparation for the classroom. This is what it takes to recruit and prepare excellent teachers – far more than the cheap piecemeal approaches currently used in the United States. Teachers must be highly skilled to deploy new technologies and the wealth of content resources available for the school curriculum, even as they tailor instruction to meet the needs of different groups of children. America's new Common Core State Standards properly set out an ambitious vision of what all children can learn. But the vision cannot be attained without well-prepared teachers who have adequate classroom resources and time to plan, collaborate, and upgrade their skills. Poor areas especially need highly effective teachers and extra resources.

What True Educational Accountability Requires

Testing for students and teachers is all the rage among U.S. policymakers, touted by advocacy groups as the best way to improve educational standards. Yet policymakers are often more eager to mandate tests than they are willing to provide the resources needed to allow teachers and students to reach higher standards. Some states, for example, require all students to pass a lab science exam before they can earn high school diplomas. In principle, that sounds reasonable, yet many children have never had access to a science lab in their public schools.

The United States has a history of local management of schooling. Funding levels, curricular content, and the staffing and organization of instruction are all matters largely left to local school districts and state-level educational agencies. Less than ten percent of U.S. school funding comes from federal government sources and overreliance on local funding leads to glaring inequalities:

- Within individual states, local school districts can have very unequal resources – with the most generously funded districts spending up to four times as much per pupil as the least well-funded districts.
- States also vary in their levels of funding, with the most generous providing three times more per pupil in funding than the least generous.
- Nine states have been found to systematically discriminate in their funding allocations, and the courts have mandated more equitable formulas.

Recently, Congress created an Equity and Excellence Commission, and its February 2013 report outlines bold steps to target extra resources to high poverty areas, improve teaching, and invest in early education so that poor children do not fall behind before kindergarten. More and better targeted public resources are required, because excellence cannot be attained just by declaring higher mass standards. As long as Americans fail to support teacher development and extra help for poor youngsters, and leave many public schools without labs, computers, and optimally prepared teachers, the United States will continue to falter in the global race for

educational excellence. We must find and implement new ways to help all of our children succeed.

Research and data for this brief were drawn from The Equity and Excellence Commission, "A Strategy for Education Equity and Excellence for Each and Every Child," U.S. Department of Education, February 2013.