

EDUCATION POLICY Center

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Equality and Quality in U.S. Education

Systemic Problems, Systemic Solutions

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ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This brief is a condensed version of a recently published book chapter titled “Quality and Equality in American Education: Systemic Problems, Systemic Solutions” that was published in *The Dynamics of Opportunity in America: Evidence and Perspectives* by Irwin Kirsch and Henry Braun (Springer, 2016), which includes a more extensive treatment of the issues discussed here.

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Recent passage of the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), coupled with recognition of rising inequality in American society, has rekindled debate about how U.S. schools might address long-standing disparities in educational and economic opportunities while improving the educational outcomes for all students. This paper enters that debate with a vision and an argument for realizing that vision, based on lessons learned from 60 years of education research and reform efforts. The central points covered draw on a much more extensive treatment of these issues published last year.¹ The aim is to spark fruitful discussion among educators, policymakers, and researchers.

An Unequal Present

Poverty and Segregation

Let's start with the children. Twenty-three percent (16 million) of American children live in poverty,² and children of color are more than twice as likely as their White counterparts to be poor.³ Many of these children live in neighborhoods that are increasingly segregated by social class, endowed with far fewer resources (recreational facilities, child care, health care, and even fresh foods), and plagued by far greater stresses than neighborhoods housing middle class and more privileged families. Moreover, fewer than half of the children from low-income families experience preschool, so they enter kindergarten lacking the vocabulary, number skills, and socializing experiences that children from better-off families possess. Once in school, students from low-income families achieve less well on average and graduate at much lower rates than students from middle-income households. The powerful effects of poverty for children of all races and ages have been well documented and help explain some of the lack of progress.

Where Do Schools Fit In?

Education is meant to be the great equalizer. Yet, the disparities that children experience outside school are actually exacerbated when they enter the doors of most U.S. education systems. These well-documented, within-school inequities include both unequal resources and dysfunctional practices and systems. Concentrated in higher poverty schools, students from low-income families, students of color, English learners, and immigrant students are more likely than their White middle-class peers to be taught by inexperienced or ineffective teachers, to be presented with watered-down and uninspiring curricula, to be situated in a chaotic school environment with high turnover rates among the adults, and to be excluded from meaningful instruction by discriminatory disciplinary policies and practices.

Disparate and Overall Mediocre Student Outcomes

Given these disparities, it is hardly surprising that the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) records achievement gaps in mathematics of two or more years between eighth-grade Black or Hispanic students and their White peers as well as between students from low- and high-income families. The gaps for reading are smaller but still substantial. With respect to high school completion, which is a strong predictor of adult income, White students graduate at a rate that is 15 percentage points higher than that for Black students, and 11 percentage points higher than that for Hispanic students.⁴

These inequitable conditions and results do not simply diminish opportunities for traditionally underserved students. Their existence pollutes the system as a whole, creating low expectations and loss of public confidence and thus depressing the quality of schooling for all—or at least the vast majority of—students in American schools. International comparisons on such assessments as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), and, to a lesser extent, the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), show that the U.S. lags well behind many other advanced nations with respect to student knowledge and skills. Though these patterns are pervasive and persistent, they are not immutable.

Signs of Progress

Student achievement and attainment data from the past 2 decades suggest progress in some areas. For example, eighth-grade mathematics scores have increased on both the international TIMSS assessment (a 17-point gain between 1995 and 2011) and NAEP (a 12-point gain between 1996 and 2013), with smaller gains in reading. Average freshman graduation rates are also up, reaching a high of 82% in 2013–14. Equally important, achievement gaps between White students and both Black and Hispanic students have narrowed significantly in mathematics, again with smaller benefits in reading. In addition, increases in high school completion rates among Black and Hispanic students between 2000 and 2010 were between two and three times the increases for White students, thus narrowing graduation disparities.

Tempering this positive news, however, are two significant facts. First, there has been **virtually no reduction in the gaps between poor⁵ and nonpoor students**, suggesting that a dominant force driving disparate outcomes among students—and overall achievement and attainment levels—is family income and its concomitant conditions. Second, in contrast to some gains on TIMSS, U.S. performance on the PISA has been essentially stagnant since its inception in 2003 and has even fallen slightly (by two points) in mathematics. This contrast suggests that the positive momentum in achievement may

pertain primarily to tests of more procedural knowledge, not to assessments that require students to apply their knowledge and skills to analyze novel situations and solve complex problems—the very type of performance needed for success in the 21st century.⁶ We clearly have much more work to do.

Observations from 60 Years of Education Reform: There Are No Silver Bullets

American education has been through numerous reform efforts in the past 60 years, many of them focused on reducing opportunity gaps both in our society as a whole and in our schools. We have directed money at the problem through supplemental funding streams, such as the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and state categorical programs, and through myriad state fiscal equity suits and policies. We have tracked (and de-tracked) students and tried homogeneous grouping by ability and heterogeneous cooperative learning in the classroom. We have tried pullout and push-in instructional approaches to give extra support to students who need it. We have focused exclusively on academics, only to turn around and chide ourselves for ignoring the whole child. We have thought teacher testing and formal qualifications on the front end were the answer to low educator quality, moving more recently to test-driven teacher evaluation as the new required solution. And the list goes on.

Many of these reforms have at least some evidence behind them to suggest their potential effectiveness, and some have been critical to the limited progress toward equity and equality cited earlier. Yet, when implemented at scale in schools and districts, the results often disappoint or even disappear.

In contrast, across the U.S., we find examples of educational systems that have demonstrated sustained improvement and that have reduced opportunity and achievement gaps through concerted and coherent systemic efforts to ensure the success of all their students. These include local school systems, such as the Long Beach or Garden Grove Unified School Districts in California and Montgomery County in Maryland, as well as a few states, such as Massachusetts, where the data demonstrate the possibilities for both quality and equality in educational opportunities.

The approach these systems take stands in sharp contrast to many of the education reform fads of the past 60 years. Their success has come not from isolated and piecemeal interventions, for which U.S. education seems to have a penchant, but rather from strategies carefully integrated into the system so that they contribute to, rather than detract from, the system's overall culture and effectiveness. Similarly, success has come

not from blaming teachers and threatening schools but rather from expecting and supporting improvement over time and learning from mistakes. And success has come not from seeing schools and districts as isolated organizations but rather as part of their communities' core institutions and partners.

The contrast between the experiences of these existence proofs and the patterns of less successful endeavors suggest three key lessons that can inform both a vision of a more equitable future and a strategic approach to getting there.

Lesson One: Implementation Dominates Impact

Decades of implementation research have yielded a panoply of lessons. Three are integral to making a more equitable education system operational.

Context matters. Differences in educational histories; in the makeup of both adult and student populations; and in cultures, conditions, structures, and resources across systems can influence the ways that local actors interpret and act on any given reform or intervention. Attempts to constrain variation in local action by emphasizing fidelity, scripted instructional programs, and compliance to one-size-fits all policies do not solve the problem and may even be counterproductive because they often inhibit professional judgment and responsiveness to individual student and local system needs.

Capacity is a key determinant of implementation quality and results. At the heart of many of the differences across contexts is their variation in local capacity, including *human capital* (the knowledge and skills of the individual actors and of the collective body of actors), *material resources*, and *program and system coherence*. Higher poverty schools and districts generally have less of all three, making implementation and improvement harder to realize and sustain. Low capacity in any of these arenas may invite dysfunction and failure.

Implementation is a social process. Effective implementation requires activating relationships among people, groups, and organizations (social capital)—not just once but repeatedly and continually. In high-poverty contexts, staff turnover and a lack of trust often impede the development of the strong relationships needed to make evidence-based practices work and to foster individual and organizational learning. Attempts to ensure implementation and the spread of effective practices through administrative mandates do little to solve the problem as they too often lead to superficial compliance without deep understanding or committed action.

Lesson Two: Piecemeal Reforms Leave Systemic Contributors Untouched

Many of these implementation challenges persist because isolated and piecemeal reforms seldom address the underlying systemic contributors to the targeted situation or inequity. Moreover, incoherence and instability in the policy environment make it difficult to identify and change these contributing conditions. Superintendents, school boards, and legislators come and go—often with great frequency—whereas disparities in resources and practices go on, bolstered by institutionalized structures and beliefs. On the ground, schools in high-poverty neighborhoods lack the information, trust, and capacity they need to examine their practices and results over time and are pulled in multiple and conflicting directions by the mixed messages they receive. High-stakes testing and rigid accountability measures can compound these issues and have the effect of drawing attention to avoiding consequences for adults rather than ensuring progress for students.

Lesson Three: Schools Can't Do It Alone

The “no excuses” rhetoric of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) era sounded tough and committed but did little to address the profound influence of poverty on a child’s chances for success in school and beyond. This rhetoric has more recently given way to recognition that although schools must address inequities stemming from educational policies and practices, they cannot overcome inequality on their own. Instead, more successful educational systems have partnered in innovative and sustained ways with other child-serving agencies and institutions, including postsecondary institutions, to develop more comprehensive and mutually reinforcing strategies—such as youth development programs, school-based health services, and social welfare supports for parents—to ensure that all students have an opportunity to succeed.

A Vision of a More Equitable Education System

What might a more equitable education system look like in the U.S.? And how might a vision for such a system be constrained by current conditions? For starters, let’s assume that, even with the continued expansion of technology, most students in the next 2 decades will likely be attending public schools configured much like those of today—that is, 20–30 students in classes with one or two adults for 12–13 years, nested in schools and districts within broader state systems. Moreover, experience and current socioeconomic patterns strongly suggest that the inequalities in children’s economic and social environments are likely to continue for the foreseeable future.

Given these constraints, three central system components emerge from both research and experience as essential for American education to have a measurable and sustained impact on gaps in educational opportunities and outcomes:

- ▶ **A foundational focus on improving the overall quality of schools and school systems** through a coherent, standards-based approach *coupled with* continuous improvement processes at all levels of the system
- ▶ **High-leverage targeted strategies adapted to local environments** to address issues particularly consequential for traditionally underserved students
- ▶ **Effective connections among schools and other institutions** and organizations touching students' lives

The Foundation: A Quality School System

Since quality and inequality are integrally linked, achieving greater equality requires ensuring a higher quality education for all. In part, this means what it has always meant—making sure that all schools and school systems have adequate, appropriate, and equitable resources to address the needs of their diverse student populations. But just as important is how those resources are used. A more equitable system would have two fundamental components built in to guide the use of resources for student success.

A Coherent Standards-Based Policy Framework. The odds of success for a school with a student population that has lacked important opportunities rise substantially if the school operates in a supportive environment where its internal (school) and external (district, state, and federal) leaders and policies are all pulling in the same direction toward quality and equity. Such support is the basic tenet of standards-based reform, a systemic improvement strategy comprising *challenging standards* stating what students should know and be able to do to succeed at different points in their schooling and afterwards; a coherent *system of mutually reinforcing policies* designed to build capacity and ensure that all students have access to opportunities to meet those standards; and a *redesigned governance system* in which broad central direction is combined with local discretion, knowledge, and innovation to achieve the goals for students.

The spread of standards-based strategies in the 1990s and early 2000s seems to have contributed to the modest gains in achievement and attainment cited earlier. However, this upward trend was attenuated in the NCLB era, when the emphasis on capacity building, responsive governance, and context-embedded solutions gave way to an almost singular focus on top-down mandates and punitive outcome accountability, diminishing both the quality of standards and their role in instructional improvement. With new flexibilities afforded by ESSA and lessons learned during the past quarter century, we can reset the standards-based approach in two important ways.

The first is to improve the quality of the standards that guide instruction and supportive policies. The adoption of challenging college- and career-ready standards in English language arts and mathematics by more than 40 states in the past 7 years, and by 18 states thus far in science, is a clear step in this direction.

Equally important is the second development of the past decade: a more nuanced, thoughtful, and longer term approach to implementation and continuous improvement in a growing number of state and local systems.

A Continuous Improvement Approach. The simple but demanding concept of continuous improvement is a logical extension of the lessons cited earlier about the importance of contextual conditions and systemic contributors to the success of any effort to improve outcomes for traditionally underserved students. A recent review of the continuous improvement literature highlights five basic features:⁷

- ▶ A focus on outcomes for specific populations and on the processes that produce them
- ▶ Learning from variations in performance, including (or especially) failures
- ▶ The understanding that results change only if the systems that produced them change
- ▶ The day-to-day use of evidence on outcomes, processes, and resources by participants throughout the system
- ▶ The use of coherent methodologies and processes to identify problems; devise and try out solutions; and then revise, retest, and spread strategies in an ever developing cycle (e.g., Six Sigma or LEAN)

In each of these features, continuous improvement approaches differ from the typical outcomes-based accountability model as implemented under NCLB. Particularly important are the approach to failures as opportunities for learning and improvement (rather than occasions for blame and punishment) and the engagement of participants throughout the system in ongoing data collection, analysis, and action relevant to their context-embedded roles. Continuous improvement creates an environment of productive accountability throughout the school year with multiple measures rather than a single year-end judgment.

Continuous improvement processes characterize many of our nation's best schools and districts. The Long Beach Unified School District in southern California, for instance, has been applying the core concepts of continuous improvement for more than 2 decades to improve outcomes for traditionally underserved students, who are 70% of the school population. In addition to its well-documented and prize-winning increases in overall student achievement and graduation rates, the district has narrowed other more change-resistant gaps: in the period from 2002 to 2012, gains for African-American students, Hispanic students, and students from low-income families on the state Academic Performance Index were approximately 50% higher than those for White students.

Educators in Long Beach often talk about “The Long Beach Way,” referring to the district’s deeply embedded cultural approach to ensuring ongoing improvement in all aspects of their work so as to enhance conditions and outcomes for all their students.

Targeted Strategies to Reduce Inequalities: Four High-Leverage Approaches

As the examples of Long Beach and similar systems demonstrate, embedding continuous improvement into the fabric of a school system can make it easier to identify and effectively address gaps in outcomes and opportunities (see Box 1 about Montgomery County). Relevant improvement practices include ongoing monitoring of access to such resources as qualified teachers and teacher time, advanced courses, and appropriate high-quality instructional materials, as well as the elimination of disparities in disciplinary actions and extracurricular activities.

BOX 1. EQUITY AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT IN MONTGOMERY COUNTY⁸

When Jerry Weast became the superintendent of the Montgomery County district in 1999, he instituted a continuous improvement approach to address the large and nationally comparable gaps between White students and their African-American and Hispanic counterparts. Geographic Information System mapping of high-poverty, high-minority, and low-achieving regions in the county catalyzed communitywide dialogue about educational disparities and race. Discussions across the district helped identify structural contributors (such as course placement policies in high school that tended to keep Hispanic and African-American students from higher level courses because they lacked the prerequisites) as well as adult norms and attitudes that prevented full access for some students. Multiple sources of data—including frequent walk-through observations using formal protocols in individual school sites—helped district leaders identify particular manifestations of unequal opportunity and design interventions, such as full-day kindergarten, small classes, and rigorous curriculum models, which they targeted to high-poverty schools.

District leaders monitored for success of these actions over time while creating a systemwide culture of collaboration focused on both excellence and equity. When Weast’s 12-year tenure ended, Montgomery County had significantly reduced gaps among racial groups across multiple performance indicators: achievement on state assessments in elementary school, completion of algebra in eighth grade, SAT and Advanced Placement (AP) results, and high school graduation. Indeed, the county posted higher AP participation and success rates for African-American students than the U.S. did for students as a whole.

In addition to regular monitoring, past research has suggested several specific arenas in which targeted attention within a continuous improvement model might be particularly beneficial for reducing persistent opportunity gaps and improving quality overall.

Creating Safe and Supportive School Environments. Physical and emotional safety in schools matter hugely to every child and parent. A growing research-based movement in the education community—social-emotional learning—emphasizes the bedrock importance of interrelated cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies to students’ success. Self-awareness, self-management or self-regulation, social awareness (including empathy), opportunities for rewarding relationships, and responsible decision making form this web of competencies. Safety and support also underlie restorative justice programs that shift the typical focus on punishment to an emphasis on building self-control and respect. A social-emotional learning culture takes considerable time and energy to implement, but the results justify these investments.

Developing Language. Language skills are important throughout a child’s schooling, as evidenced by the integration of language development and content learning in the Common Core State Standards and the Next Generation Science Standards. But language development may be most critical both for young students from low-income families who have had little access to preschool opportunities and for English learners. Children who are comparatively word poor by the time they reach school age may need special help acquiring the literacy and oral language skills that will be essential to their success in later grades. And for students whose families don’t speak English at home, English language development is an inescapable need. While research clearly shows the cognitive benefits of bilingualism for all students, English learners face the dual challenge of mastering increasingly sophisticated and demanding content while learning a new language. One road-tested and evidence-based strategy is to combine high-quality instruction in these students’ native language with instruction in English through dual-language or bilingual programs.

Implementing Tiered Interventions. Response to intervention (RTI) is a three-tiered approach to instructional intervention that is grounded first and foremost in ensuring a high-quality, accessible core instructional program for all students (tier 1) and then appropriate interventions for students who encounter difficulty succeeding in that program (tiers 2 and 3). For four out of five students, regular monitoring through formative and other assessment practices and regular feedback to students (tier 1) is enough to ensure adequate progress. But when it isn’t, tier 2 interventions might include tutoring by a reading specialist or other intensive customized help. Tier 3 comes into play for the 5% to 10% of students who still don’t respond. For them, special services under a federal 504 plan or even an individualized education program may be needed.

Attending to Student Transition Points. Certain predictable times in a student's journey through school can be consequential for later success, particularly for students from less-advantaged backgrounds:

- ▶ Transition into K–12 schooling in kindergarten, especially as fewer than half of all students from low-income families have preschool experience to prepare them
- ▶ Transition to intermediate grades (between Grades 3 and 4), by which time students are expected to be fluent readers able to extract meaning from text
- ▶ Transition to middle school, where preadolescent physical and emotional changes can be especially distracting when combined with the other stresses of poverty and discrimination
- ▶ Transition to and through high school, where early warning systems, multiple pathways, and strong counseling may help ensure that all students have access to appropriate courses and supports so that they graduate and have the necessary performance and course prerequisites to pursue postsecondary opportunities (see Box 2).

Transitions create opportunities and stress. Institutions with social-emotional learning cultures and effective intervention systems can help make the transitions exciting and rewarding, but even these schools may find that many students will struggle with such changes. Careful attention to students at these times can make a difference.

Connections Between Schools and Community-Based Services

The entire environment in which students live influences their development and success in school. Good medical care, healthy food, a supportive and language-rich environment, recreational facilities, and access to preschool are among the conditions that poor neighborhoods typically lack and that community-based organizations, government agencies, and churches may try to provide through various programs and services. Connecting schools to such services and organizations has long been the goal of a small but active set of reformers—from John Dewey and Jane Adams in the early 1900s to today's growing movement for community schools.

Perhaps the best-known example of a systemic community-based approach—and surely one of the most expensive—has been the Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ), which takes up a 100-block area in Harlem's largely African-American area of New York City. HCZ connects students and their families with the entire panoply of social and educational services and raises funds for new or missing services. The federal Promise Neighborhood grants program, now in more than 40 districts across the country, is modeled after the HCZ.

BOX 2. GRADUATION AND POSTSECONDARY TRANSITIONS IN FRESNO, CALIFORNIA⁹

To better ensure the transition of students to and through high school, many districts across the U.S. now have early warning and intervention systems to identify students at risk for dropping out. In the Chicago Public Schools, for example, researchers believe that the use of a ninth-grade early-warning indicator may have contributed to a 13-point increase in the percentage of ninth graders on-track for graduation between 2008 and 2011.¹⁰

The Fresno Unified School District in California's Central Valley has taken this approach even farther through its Equity and Access initiative, which seeks to ensure that Fresno students graduate with "the greatest number of postsecondary choices from the widest array of options." The initiative began by developing a new data system and new indicators designed specifically to inform counselors' interactions with the individual students in their charge. Examined through ongoing, structured review processes, these data allow counselors and district staff to identify student needs, pose questions related to those needs, make decisions to guide their actions, and examine changes in staff practices and student outcomes. Three types of indicators provide the necessary information for this process:

- ▶ *Student performance indicators* (e.g., course completion, grades, eligibility for various segments of the California higher education system, test scores, and behavior)
- ▶ *Student procedure indicators* (e.g., college applications, FAFSA completion, college entrance and placement exam completion, college registration and articulation, and career focus)
- ▶ *Staff practice indicators* (e.g., number of students seen by a counselor or social worker and number of eligible students applying to college)

Using these data, collected and reviewed in real time, counselors can intervene to change conditions for individual students, ensuring that they complete the courses and processes necessary for graduation and postsecondary transition.

The results have been promising. Fresno is one of California's poorest districts, with a student population that is 90% minority, 84% eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, and 25% English learners. Yet, during the initial 4 years of the initiative (2010–2014), Fresno's graduation rate increased by 10 percentage points (compared with a 6-percentage point gain statewide), the A-G course completion rate (needed for acceptance to a state university) rose to 15 percentage points above the state average, applications to the California State University System went up by 16%, and matriculation in 4-year colleges increased by 14%.¹¹ Success in this work has led to expanding these continuous improvement methods to other areas of the district's work.

Other districts have developed different models for connecting schools to the broader community, sometimes including employers and postsecondary institutions as well as service providers.

The systemic nature of these collaborations and the urgency of the need among the populations they serve make a compelling case for their existence in every high-poverty neighborhood.

Getting From Here to There: The Problem of Change at Scale

This vision of a more equitable system addresses key shortcomings of past and current efforts to reduce achievement and opportunity gaps. It provides a framework to promote and extend system coherence, embeds improvement efforts in specific systemic contexts, balances systemwide approaches with targeted interventions for students who are underserved or struggling, and recognizes the importance of connecting schools with other agencies and organizations that affect children and their families. But envisioning a more equitable system is one thing; moving in this direction—and doing it at scale—is something else.

Bureaucratic inertia and fractured politics combine to make sustained movement difficult. But three potential sources of the pressure (to engender action) and support (to increase its effectiveness) are at hand: governmental and administrative policy, professional networks and norms, and community and stakeholder constituencies.

Designing Governmental Policy to Motivate and Support Improvement and Equity

Governmental and administrative policy at the federal, state, and local levels has been the main source of external pressure and support for educational change in the U.S.—particularly with regard to equalizing opportunities for poor students, students of color, and English learners. During the past 6 decades, policy has generally become more centralized, with states providing an increased portion of school funding (and demanding greater accountability for how those funds are spent) and the federal government taking more of a role in not only enforcing equality but also influencing the core direction of schooling. In balancing pressure and support, the scales at these two levels have generally tipped toward pressure and compliance, although requirements are often tied to categorical funding streams that wear the guise of inducements and fiscal support rather than blanket mandates.

To move toward a system that facilitates continuous improvement where it matters most—in classrooms, schools, and districts—will require reconceptualizing the roles of the three levels of government and placing greater emphasis on support for improvement relative to pressure to improve. At the core of this reconceptualization are twin principles: common commitment at all levels to equal opportunity, achievement, and attainment complemented by governmental restraint and focus on achieving these goals.

Federal Policy. In the wake of the federally intrusive policies of the NCLB Act, policy actors on both sides of the aisle have moved to pare down the amount of federal regulation and return some previously appropriated control to the states. The continuation of this positive development could productively be guided by a simple two-pronged test for what the federal government should—and should *not*—do in K–12 education:

- ▶ Does the activity protect or directly support the U.S. constitutional and legislated rights of students to receive equal opportunity to a high-quality education?
- ▶ Does the activity apply to the entire nation and is it more efficiently and effectively delivered by the federal government rather than by states and districts?

Implementing these criteria would focus the federal role on ensuring equity and providing needed additional resources without dictating one-size-fits-all prescriptions of education practice to states, districts, and schools. Four types of current activities could meet these criteria:

- ▶ **Protecting and supporting the rights of all students to equal educational opportunity.** The Office of Civil Rights has been more active in the past 8 years than in the early years of this millennium. This should continue but with greater emphasis going forward on a support function for the agency rather than the enforcer role for which it has been mainly known.
- ▶ **Ensuring equal opportunity for students protected under federal law** through such programs as the Education for all Handicapped Act, Title III of ESEA, and programs for Native American students. These programs should probably undergo expert reviews to make sure that they have the structures and the resources needed to innovate and support greater opportunities for their targeted populations, especially in light of recent research on teaching and learning.
- ▶ **Reducing resource inequities.** This function occurs primarily through Title I of ESEA, which allocates federal dollars to schools serving students from low-income families. Title I is currently in a period of transition from the highly prescriptive and punitive provisions under NCLB, but it is not yet clear how much of the prescriptive accountability approach will remain when the new regulations for ESSA go into effect. To help accelerate equity and improvement, Title I funding should be increased,

targeted more narrowly to high-poverty schools, and freed of most of the legislative and regulatory strictures on its use, though comparability and supplement-not-supplant provisions should remain. Additional provisions and incentives might also help equalize resources across richer and poorer states or even jump-start more equitable approaches to school funding within states and districts.

- **Supporting research, innovation, and data for improvement.** The Department of Education should continue to support research and national data collection and analysis, focusing on improving teaching and learning and innovating in areas such as technology. These activities are truly national in scope and cannot be carried out efficiently by states and localities. The department also should support more theoretical and problem-based work to aggregate knowledge and deepen understanding of the key factors in developing and sustaining more effective and equitable education systems.

Zeroing in on these four functions while reducing or eliminating other federal actions could help create more favorable conditions for local and state action that responds more effectively to the diversity of American educational contexts.

The State Role. The states' constitutionally enabled role in education—embracing everything from governance, finance, and curriculum to supporting, enhancing, and monitoring quality in education—is in practice shared with districts. But states typically create the legislative and regulatory framework that guides districts and make decisions about content and performance standards, teacher certification, accountability, assessments, and data collection. States also oversee both federal and state programs for protected categories of students and create the framework for school finance.

This system works to some degree and for some students, but for more than a century, it has perpetuated well-documented discrimination against students from low-income families and students of color. To move resolutely toward the goal of equal opportunity for all, states must develop, maintain, and improve well-functioning education systems for all schools and students throughout the state. If the system is dysfunctional, the least advantaged among us will suffer the most. To shore up the documented racial- and poverty-related gaps in finance, teacher preparedness, and other resources, states could take on four broad roles or tasks:

- **Establishing a vision, standards, and priorities.** Adopting and supporting implementation of a new generation of standards and assessments and aligning them to policies pushing in the same direction in curriculum development, educator training, and accountability are vital to successful education reform. Equally important is ensuring that local districts receive consistent signals from system leaders and that state leaders exhibit a steadfast commitment to improvement.

- ▶ **Providing human capital resources.** Visions and plans vaporize without infrastructure and other resources. Most states face serious human capital issues that hold back improvement and perpetuate inequality. These include teacher shortages, inadequate preservice training, limited capacity of current teachers for teaching the new content or teaching all students, and a limited supply of well-trained principals. Moreover, the challenge of creating and maintaining a continuous improvement environment and implementing a thoughtful intervention system requires changing the responsibilities of educators throughout the system. States are well positioned to ensure that all students have access to high-quality and effective personnel by supporting the recruitment of talented and committed people to enter the profession, fostering infrastructure to support teachers and principals to grow in their jobs, and ensuring equitable access for all children to high-quality teachers and other education professionals.
- ▶ **Ensuring adequate and fair funding.** In 22 states, more than half of the funding for education comes from state coffers. Ensuring that funding levels are adequate and adopting and implementing a statewide weighted student formula or similar approach that allocates funds based on student need can go a long way toward addressing current disparities in educational resources among districts. States also could take steps to stimulate within-district equalization. And they could incorporate additional support for students at high risk who fall outside the protected categories of race or poverty: 4% to 6% of the nation's students are in foster homes (400,000), have one or both parents who are incarcerated (2.7 million), are homeless (500,000 in any given year), or suffer from a serious mental disorder (an estimated 4 million).
- ▶ **Establishing a data system and accountability approach that support improvement.** As the locus of education accountability continues to shift from the federal government to state governments, the new watch-phrase should be reciprocal accountability. Too often in the past, teachers' and schools' feet were held to the fire when federal- or state-set performance goals weren't met. Districts, in contrast, rarely suffered consequences, especially for failing to adequately fund and support low-performing schools. This situation must change if accountability is to be useful in engendering change. And to do so requires data not only on student outcomes but also on the processes and resources employed to produce those outcomes, a basic requirement for continuous improvement methodologies.

The District Role. Of all the levels of governance, local districts have the most direct influence on what happens in schools. How they allocate resources, set instructional policy, establish infrastructure to support learning and ensure equity, and recruit and support teachers varies hugely from district to district, depending on district size, resources, and professional capacity and student body composition. Two thirds of the

13,500 districts in the U.S. have fewer than 1,500 students and rely heavily on regional or county educational offices to help carry out these functions. Today, support from these offices often conflicts with and is trumped by their regulatory responsibilities. But if federal and state governments emphasize compliance less and support more, local and regional entities could more easily follow suit where it matters most—in our schools.

Four opportunities to motivate and support quality and equality locally stand out as particularly important:

- ▶ **Creating a culture of continuous improvement.** Steady gains in learning and achievement cannot be expected without common goals and metrics to measure progress. New data systems are now available in many states and districts. Dashboards reflecting multiple measures, support for cross-school and cross-functional collaboration and learning, and a culture of trust in which failures are construed as learning opportunities are also part of this educational model.
- ▶ **Ensuring strategic and equitable resource allocation.** A second critical task is to clearly align the district's budgeting with its goals. Equitable resource allocation must reflect student and school needs, affording openings to expand on successes and prune away failures. This effort will often require hard decisions and substantial budgetary changes.
- ▶ **Developing human capital.** Human capital is the foundation of continuous improvement in education. Educator quality is a goal throughout the educational system, but recruitment, tenure, assignment, and evaluation decisions are local, as are most recruitment pools. (See Box 3.)
- ▶ **Engaging the community.** Engaging the public, managing local education politics effectively, and connecting schools and students with social services rounds out the local district role. Rapid turnover among board-appointed superintendents also points to the need to work more closely with school boards, which are often politically freighted stepping stones to higher elected offices and which can help or hinder program implementation.

While governmental policy and action at these three levels could help to motivate and support educational improvement and equity, too many papers about addressing disparities in educational opportunities begin and end with an argument about policy, as if passing or enforcing a few laws and allocating funds will change the schooling experiences of currently underserved students sufficiently to fulfill the promise of equal opportunity.

This singular focus on policy for engendering the needed changes has two flaws. First, as the federal government's current polarization demonstrates, it is often very difficult to obtain agreement among elected officials to move in a coherent and productive direction

BOX 3. HUMAN CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT IN GARDEN GROVE¹²

Garden Grove Unified School District (GGUSD) in southern California serves a student population of approximately 45,000, 77% of whom are from low-income families and 41% of whom are English learners. The 2004 winner of the Broad Prize for Urban Education, GGUSD attributes much of its success to its efforts to attract and support the highest quality teachers to serve its diverse student population. GGUSD's comprehensive approach to human capital development centers on getting the best teachers possible, building their capacity, and instilling a culture of improvement throughout all aspects of the district's work. Strategies for attracting high-quality teachers include approaches to recruitment and student teaching that allow the district to prepare and assess prospective teaching talent. Then, hiring, placement, and induction emphasize multiple opportunities for feedback and socialization into the professional culture and the high expectations of the district before a well-informed and selective tenure decision is made. Once in the district, teachers are well compensated and supported through a comprehensive approach to professional learning (both individual and collaborative), instructional supervision and feedback, and opportunities for teacher leadership.

But GGUSD's success may be less about the specifics of its human capital strategies than about the culture that the district has created and perpetuates through those strategies. Built on a foundation of respect and personal relationships, collective problem solving, and deep commitment to the well being and learning of each and every child, GGUSD's culture combines caring and improvement. The district's recognition of its important role in human capital development is encapsulated in the former superintendent's slogan, "You'll never be better than your teachers."

or exercise restraint and focus in their policymaking. That the reauthorization of ESEA was 8 years behind schedule is hardly surprising given these circumstances. And the politics in many statehouses is as problematic as it is in Washington, D.C. This suggests that additional sources of pressure and support—sometimes directed at policymakers themselves—might be needed.

Second, even under the best and most focused and coherent of policy environments, the power of policy is limited in improving what actually goes on inside schools and classrooms. For that, the active and committed engagement of the education profession itself is necessary.

Increasing Professional Accountability and Support

Decades of policy implementation research have demonstrated that teaching is too complex to be governed by bureaucratically defined rules and routines. Teachers not only require specialized knowledge, as do all professionals, but also must be able to apply their knowledge and skills in specific contexts (different students, content areas, and school settings) to the benefit of their clients (students). Mature professions encapsulate the requisite knowledge in professionally determined standards of practice, and members of the profession assume responsibility for defining and enforcing the standards. This is professional accountability.

Professional accountability can motivate and support continuous improvement in education. The focus on instructionally relevant processes and student outcomes sets the stage for continuous improvement cycles, the emphasis on professional knowledge increases the odds that educators can interpret and act on the information they generate or receive, and professional collaboration can validate or challenge educators' assumptions about effective practices and students' capabilities. Professional accountability also expands incentives for improvement, especially by drawing on the core motivation to teach.

Historically, the education profession in the U.S. has been a much weaker source of either pressure or support than its counterparts in many other countries, and American professional associations have not been among the most consistent advocates for equity. That situation is starting to change. The recent emergence of professional learning communities manifests the potential of professional capital and accountability. In California's Sanger Unified School District, communities of practice address a shared practical problem, plan how to address it, do what they set out to do, and then study the results. Four key questions inform the improvement strategy: What do we want our students to learn? How will we know when they have learned it? How will we respond if they haven't learned? And how will we respond if they have? Other districts have instituted similar plan-do-study-act cycles.

Professional associations and networks also develop and diffuse the field's norms and practices, which makes them excellent vehicles for taking continuous improvement and professional learning communities to scale across districts and states. The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics and the California Subject Matter Projects have both changed teaching practices and norms and kept communication lines among professionals from different disciplines open.

In a similar mode, networks of schools or districts—such as California's 10 CORE districts, which share common metrics and activities to implement the Common Core State Standards, increase achievement, and reduce disparities—foster mutual learning and improvement.

Notably, as important as these formal structures are to progress toward excellence and equity, it is the professional learning and relationships within them that drive the work from person to person, school to school, and district to district.

Mobilizing an Engaged Citizenry

Too many equity-promoting reforms have fallen on the sword of partisan politics and public pushback. Often, deep-seated beliefs about meritocracy, the scarcity of educational goods, and the innate abilities of some children get in the way. And the ambient power structure can preserve advantages for wealthier and more privileged communities at the expense of less-well-off communities or the nation as a whole. But this is not the way it has to be.

Working together, broad swaths of educators, higher education institutions, employer associations, parent organizations, advocacy and civil rights groups, health care and community organizations, and others can change this picture. Pioneered by the Strive Together Initiative in Cincinnati, Ohio, new collective impact strategies that zero in on intractable and complex social problems have led to transformative changes. They bring data to bear on decision making and continually weigh the impacts of decisions on its own institutions and the larger educational ecosystem.

The prototypical collective impact approach involves establishing a shared community vision, instituting evidence-based decision making and shared accountability among partners to improve selected outcomes, using continuous improvement to identify and spread promising practices, and aligning financial and other resources to support and sustain improvement. Thanks to ample coordination across sectors and organizations, such strategies can incubate and support major social change better than individual organizations and agencies can. They also can help sustain direction and activity during leadership changes that so often derail the equity and improvement agendas. Collective impact approaches have become more popular for addressing major social problems, including those in education.

Along with collective impact strategies and other *grass-tops* approaches to educational and community change, *grassroots* organizing can keep up the pressure on policymakers, local education leaders, and others to provide full opportunities to students in high-poverty communities and communities of color. And this work isn't always or strictly adversarial. In California, local organizing efforts were instrumental in raising new state monies for education and in passing a new funding system that allocates resources more equitably to districts, based on student need. Combining grass-tops collective impact strategies and grassroots organizing into a new social movement for equal opportunity may be the only way to ensure that the other sources of pressure and support—particularly governmental policy—are mobilized to generate and sustain a more equitable and high-quality system for all students.

Conclusion

Many opportunities are emerging for acting on the theory of change proposed here. One is the current authorization of ESEA, known as ESSA, which reduces the federal constraints of NCLB and at least suggests a stronger focus on support over punitive approaches to accountability. Another is the increasing interest across the country in continuous improvement strategies supported by collaboration and professional networking, along with growing examples of their use and data on the resulting improvements for students. A third opportunity lies in the signs of growing activism among young people focused on social justice, despite the deeply divided and generally paralyzed federal policy environment. Finally, more and more educators, policymakers, and others are realizing the importance of addressing the full range of children's needs and attending to their social and emotional development as the basis for not only school success but also success in career and civic participation. For these reasons, the goals and strategies proposed here (and in the longer work it summarizes) could have broad bipartisan appeal. The challenge will be to make a compelling argument that convinces educators and the public that the changes are necessary, urgent, important, and possible.

Endnotes

1. O'Day, J. A., & Smith, M. S. (2016). Quality and equality in American education: Systemic problems, systemic solutions. In I. Kirsch & H. Braun (Eds.), *The dynamics of opportunity in America: Evidence and perspectives*. New York, NY: Springer International.
2. This figure is for children whose families live below the official poverty line (\$24,250 for a family of four in 2015). However, *more than half* of U.S. public school students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches (often used as a proxy for low income) because they live in households whose income is less than 185% of the poverty threshold.
3. Except where otherwise noted, citations for the information presented throughout this brief are available in the original published version, available at http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-25991-8_9. Citations for updated data are included in endnotes.
4. See <http://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-high-school-graduation-rate-hits-new-record-high-0>
5. Defined as eligible for free and reduced-price meals.
6. A third observation worth noting is that the gains during the past 2 decades seem to be concentrated between the mid-1990s and the early 2000s, tapering off during the period of punitive accountability under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). This pattern is instructive in discerning lessons for future policy.
7. See Park, S., Hironaka, S., Carver, C., & Lee, N. (2012). *Continuous improvement in education*. Stanford, CA: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.
8. See Weast, J. D. (2014). Confronting the achievement gap: A district-level perspective. In K. McCartney, H. Yoshikawa, & L. B. Forcier (Eds.), *Improving the odds for America's children: Future directions in policy and practice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
9. For a more complete discussion of Fresno's equity and access work, see Haxton, C., & O'Day, J. (2015). *Improving equity and access in Fresno: Lessons from a K-12 higher education partnership*. Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research.
10. Allensworth, E. (2013). The use of ninth-grade early warning indicators to improve Chicago schools. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, 18(1), 68–83.
11. More recent data from the California Department of Education show even larger gains. Between 2013–14 and 2014–15, Fresno's graduation rate increased by 4.5 percentage points, compared to a 1.3 percentage point gain for the state as a whole. Fresno's rate (83.8%) now exceeds that of the state (82.3%).
12. For a case study of Garden Grove's human capital system, see Knudson, J. (2013). *You'll never be better than your teachers: The Garden Grove approach to human capital development*. San Mateo, CA: The California Collaborative on District Reform.



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