

# Educational Equity in America: Is Education the Great Equalizer?

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## Abstract

*As mandates regarding the education of our youth intensify in complexity, educators are forced to face issues that are fundamental in the development of our educational productivity. No Child Left Behind legislation has required all parties with a vested interest in the security of our educational efficiency to secure a variety of viable methods to ensure an equal education for all. This article addresses the issues surrounding educational equity in America, national and local reforms, closing the achievement gap, and leadership implications for student achievement.*

From its inception, American public education has had as one of its tenets the notion of being that remedy by which inequality of opportunity and poverty can be reduced, thereby becoming the great equalizer. Of the many causes dear to Horace Mann's heart, "none was closer than the education of the people" (Cremin, 1957, p. 6). He envisioned a school that would be available and equal for all, part of the birthright of every American child, to be for the rich and the poor alike. Mann found "social harmony" to be his primary goal of the school (Cremin, 1957, p. 8). Horace Mann (1848, as cited in *Education and Social Inequity*, n.d.) succinctly states, "Education, then, beyond all other divides of human origin, is a great equalizer of conditions of men—the balance wheel of the social machinery." Gerardo Gonzalez (2001) echoes the same sentiment by saying that, "Education is the great equalizer in a democratic society, and if people are not given access to a quality education, then what we are doing is creating an underclass of people who will challenge our very way of life." He further declares that the "civil rights question of our nation today is that of access to a quality education (Gonzalez, 2001, p. 2).

The American ideal is for students of all socio-economic and racial/ethnic backgrounds to have access to a free, quality public education (Cremin, 1957). Equal access allows the opportunity for all children to develop their own human capital, making themselves marketable in a capitalistic

economic system. With the increased emphasis on the cognitive realities in the advancement of mankind, the recurring theme of a quality education for all resonates continually in our society. Since the landmark United States Supreme Court ruling *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka* (Colleen & Carlos, 2001), education has been seen more as a distributor of wealth, making the concept of equality not only a moral/social necessity, but an economic one as well.

Valarie Lee and David Burkam (2002) on the other hand present conflicting opinions about education being the "great equalizer" (p. 1). Since the key goal of public education is to make sure that every student has a chance to excel, both in school and in life, they felt that numerous factors prevent education from being "the great equalizer." Schools serving low-income students receive fewer resources, face greater difficulties attracting qualified teachers, face many more challenges in addressing student's needs, and receive less support from parents. This inequality is widely recognized. However, the inequities facing children before they enter school are less publicized (Lee & Burkam, 2002) and are paramount. "We should expect schools to increase achievement for all students, regardless of race, income, class and prior achievement. But it is unreasonable to expect schools to completely eliminate any large pre-existing inequalities soon after children first enter the education system, especially if those schools are under-funded

and over-challenged" (Lee & Burkam, 2002, p. 2). Further investigation by Lee and Burkam suggests that disadvantaged children start kindergarten with significantly lower cognitive skills than their more advanced counterparts. In an attempt to address the problems associated with educational inequalities, reform initiatives and mandates have been identified as possible ways of developing, enacting, and implementing sound policies that would bring about effective change in our nation's youths and schools.

### Reform Measures and Mandates

In recent history, major debates about the role of public education in our nation's future have centered not only on whether public education is effective, but whether it is effective for all students—especially students entering schools with meager access to resources and opportunities to supplement their formal school experience. Prompted by the startling results of the report entitled *A Nation At Risk* (National Commission of Excellence in Education, 1983), heightened measures to assure that our young people are not displaying increased tendencies toward mediocrity have caused an intensified effort toward raising the bar of high achievement (James, Jurich & Estes, 2001). Reform measures and mandates such as No Child Left Behind have brought to the forefront the urgency of making certain every child is provided an opportunity to achieve (McDonald, 2002; Ross, 2002). These mandates have not always accomplished their goal. According to Lenz (2002), the core of the No Child Left Behind Act is largely a case of "been there, done that" (p. 1). No Child Left Behind legislation has left no school district unconfused (Christie, 2002). The new requirements to link funding with accountability, to link classroom practice with scientifically-based research, to use assessment to guide improvement hold equal measures of promise and peril (Christie, 2002).

Equity in educational opportunity has relied on creating and maintaining programmatic initiatives designed to ensure effective teaching and learning for all students. An irony and one of the sources of frustration to advocates of educational improvement has been the difficulty of sustaining reform

initiatives. A major challenge seems to be continuity in implementing change strategies in some change-immune school systems (Usdan & Cuban, 2002).

Reformers tend to attribute the problems of student achievement to "poorly prepared or bad" teachers (Marsh, 2001; Foote, Vermette, Wisniewski, Agnello, & Pagaro, 2000; Walls, Nardi, & Von Minden, 2002). Evidence advances the idea that an equally or more serious problem is an increased level of teacher detachment and alienation from their work and their students (National Education Association, 1987; Metz, 1990; Corcoran, Walker, & White, 1988). Compelling research indicates that teacher quality is the single most important school variable affecting student achievement (Prince, 2002). "The more impoverished and racially isolated the school, the greater the likelihood the students will be taught by inexperienced teachers, uncertified teachers, and out-of-field teachers who do not hold a degree in the subject they are assigned to teach. Schools with these characteristics are invariably low-performing schools" (Prince, 2002, p. 1). Kati Haycock, director of the Education Trust, maintains that about half of the achievement gap would disappear "if we only took the simple step of assuring that poor and minority children had highly qualified teachers" (Haycock, 1998, p. 2). She continues to argue that

Even though some states and communities have made efforts to correct the inequitable distribution of high quality teachers, none have committed themselves to an all-out effort to assure that poor children are taught by teachers of at least the same quality as other children. We need—as a nation, as states, as communities, as institutions and as individuals—to do just that. (p. 26)

The newly reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), on the other hand, makes it clear that "the inequitable distribution of high quality teachers will no longer be tolerated. The law requires that by 2005, every school district must ensure that all of its teachers are highly qualified" (Prince, 2002, p. 22).

Since access to quality education for all is advocated as the great equalizer, assurances that schools

are fulfilling their role in providing the necessary ingredients to assist in developing each student to their potential is to be realized by all. In John Goodlad's (1984) study, *A Place Called School*, he examined a wide range of documents that tried to define the purposes of American schooling over the past 300 years. He discovered four broad goals: academic, vocational, social and civic, and personal.

The past decades have emphasized school desegregation which has been motivated by a desire to end segregation of ethnic and language minority students. These efforts have produced little change that would embrace and enhance social and academic integration (Bartlett 1994; Yancey & Saporito, 1995). The vision of "setting" of schooling has become a major barrier to the nation's quest to improve school for the very students who are the intended beneficiaries of desegregation (Lipsky & Gartner, 1989; Wang & Reynolds, 1995).

On the other hand, Ivan Illich (1971) viewed schools as institutions that perform a political rather than an educational function. According to Illich, the diplomas and degrees issued by schools reflected a certification role rather than an educational one. Schools provided society's stamp of approval, announcing who shall succeed, who shall be awarded status, and who shall remain in poverty. By compelling students to attend, by judging and labeling them, by confining them, and by discriminating among them, Illich believed that schools were actually harming children.

At the heart of the reform movement in America are questions such as these (Hoyle & Slater, 2001): Are teachers energetic, laughing, and talking about helping students and one another? Are the school vision, mission, and goals clearly communicated, understood, and shared by the entire school staff, the students, and the parents? Are teachers given performance data for each student, and is staff development focused on student learning and teaching strategies to teach all students? Are administrators, counselors, teachers, and parents sharing ideas about helping all students—those of color, boys and girls, the disabled, the challenged, and those from lower income homes? Lastly, reform for what? These complicated and complex questions can only be answered by those who are now influ-

encing school policy and the future of education (Hoyle & Slater, 2001). Reform measures and mandates are imperative to ensure equal access to education in recognizing and addressing the achievement gap. There continues to be a growing body of knowledge concerning techniques and strategies intended to narrow and/or close the existing gap.

### **Closing The Achievement Gap**

Although it may seem as though the achievement gap may be a black and white issue, it is more accurate to refer to multiple gaps. Roughly defined, an achievement gap is the disparity between the academic performance of different groups of students. Several such gaps have been revealed by research as largely along economic, racial, and ethnic lines. There is a gap between students from low-income families and their more affluent peers. This gap is also noted as a disparity between minority students, especially African American, Hispanic, and Native American students, and their White and Asian American counterparts (National Task Force on Minority High Achievement, 1999).

With the advent of federal legislation packaged as No Child Left Behind coupled with the demands of accountability and public unrest, there seems to be another "sleeping giant" in the midst of this struggling educational system. There is yet another academic challenge for the professionals who strive to continue the advancement of the instructional process of schools. "To increase the achievement levels of minority and low-income students, we need to focus on what really matters: high standards, a challenging curriculum, and good teachers" (Haycock, 2001, p. 1).

The lack of knowledge has been quite surprising since the gap has been documented since the late 1960s (Viadero, 2000). While the 1970s noted the beginning of a turnaround regarding persistent gaps between Black and White students on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the 1980s continued the trend (Sadowski, 2001). According to Viadero (2002):

Between 1970, when the National Assessment of Educational Progress first began taking the national pulse on student achievement, and

1980, Black and Hispanic students made great strides in narrowing the gulf that once separated them from their White peers. But all of that progress seemed to grind to a halt beginning in 1988.

Bowman (1994) suggests that one of the most serious and explosive issues in the United States today is how they meet the educational needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students. She further contends that, should current trends continue, millions of students (primarily poor African American, Asian, Native American and Hispanic) will not obtain the education necessary for full participation in the economic and civic life of the country.

Poverty is often cited as the main indicator of student progress or lack thereof. As researchers continue to seek the answers to this growing concern, one thing is certain: the standard answers are not satisfying the problem. Christopher Jencks and Meredith Phillips (1998), editors of *The Black-White Test Score Gap*, noted that what were thought to be the causes are not as important as some other things. Phillips (1998) further suggests that traditional liberal and conservative explanations do not explain much.

Haycock (as cited in Viadero, 2000, p. 2) states, "I think a lot of people continued to think things were getting better. Now, we've seen 10 years of no progress and, in some subjects, a widening of the gap. There's too much evidence to ignore." According to Sadowski (2001), the gaps seem to get wider each year. While researchers have made efforts to control for socioeconomic status, level of parental education, and other factors that contributed to scholastic achievement, the score gap between White and Black students persists, and no one is really sure why.

While many theories are available, one thing is certain: the gap has not tapered in recent years. Sadowski (2001) notes that some researchers blame low standards, a lack of resources, and what they consider to be less-skilled teachers in schools that have large numbers of Black students. Another school of thought suggests the change in curricular emphasis from basic skill development in the 1970s

and 1980s to higher order skills for which students, and possibly teachers, were not properly prepared. And yet other researchers insist that, despite controlled study efforts, the effects of recession cannot be disentangled from the host of other economic and social factors that affect Black students and their success in school (Sadowski, 2001). According to Robelen (2002) most experts agree that a range of socioeconomic factors leave poor and minority students at a disadvantage even before they enter the schoolhouse doors.

In a recent study done by James, Jurich and Estes (2001) entitled, *Raising Minority Academic Achievement: A Compendium of Education Programs and Practices*, it was suggested that there is no "magic bullet." This study analyzed a large number of programs thought to have had an impact on the educational progress of minority students. James, et al. (2001) indicated, "no magic bullet was found, that is, no one strategy is common to all programs that have good findings" (p. 20). While no one strategy was celebrated as the medicine to cure all ills, James, et al. (2001) did identify the 10 most frequent strategies conducive to the structures of the most defined programs that were evaluated. From most to least frequently cited in the program evaluations, these strategies are:

- I. **Program Quality:** High standards must include a concern with the quality of the program and its staff before demands are made from participants. Quality of implementation, leadership and accountability are major strategies utilized to promote and secure high program standards.
- II. **Academically Demanding Curricula:** early childhood programs should provide pre-school aged children with challenging educational activities that are also developmentally appropriate.
- III. **Professional Development:** The ability to maintain the quality of any program is not dependent upon the creation of mechanisms for quality control. Staff must be prepared to respond to the challenge.
- IV. **Family Involvement:** Approximately 40% of the selected evaluations report activities gear-

ed toward improving communications with families or increasing family involvement with the programs.

- V. **Reduced Student-to-Teacher Ratios:** Many selected programs that show academic gains for minority students include strategies to reduce student-to-teacher ratios.
- VI. **Individualized Supports:** For students who are struggling academically, individualized support may be the difference between falling behind and moving ahead. In addition to the involvement of the students' families, many programs utilize community members, college students, employers, and other groups as tutors and mentors to address the academic needs of specific students or offer support, feedback and encouragement.
- VII. **Extended Learning Time:** Some programs use longer school hours, extra school days, Saturdays, and summer courses to provide students with more learning time.
- VIII. **Community Involvement:** Community participation is essential to the program, reinforcing cultural traditions and knowledge that are interwoven with the more traditional curricula.
- IX. **Long-Term Supports for Youth:** Several programs encourage long-term, stable relationships between participants and knowledgeable adults.
- X. **Scholarships and/or Financial Support:** Several successful programs offer financial help to students who demonstrate high academic performance.

While there is no known program that can guarantee academic success for all students, most programs that show positive results implement mechanisms to ensure program quality, maintain well-trained teachers and support staff, and provide academically demanding courses (James, et al., 2001, p. 22). The challenges surrounding the active legislation of No Child Left Behind must be aggressively attacked by a joint effort of the educational community—the administrators, teachers, students, parents and community members. James Easton, superintendent of schools in

Lafayette Parish, Louisiana (Dominique, 2002), says that while he applauds the president for being a driving force behind the No Child Left Behind mandates coming to fruition, he asks the question “Just like there is a zero tolerance for violence, ought there not be a zero tolerance for failure?” (p. 1B).

### Leadership Implications for Student Achievement

The United States in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century will see greater ethnic and cultural diversity than in any other period in American history (Naylor, 1997; Sitarem & Prosser, 1998). Groups that have been underserved by our public schools in the past will increase in population in the future (Lunenburg & Irby, 1999; Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2002). As the United States continues to grow with such a diverse population of non-White Americans (Population Reference Bureau, 1999), this factor alone will change the face of school leadership and will bring about a new administrative challenge (Neuman & Pelchat, 2001). These are difficult times in public education and the roles of teachers and administrators are changing (Gunn, 2001).

Diana Lam (as cited in Neuman & Pelchat, 2001, p. 733), a superintendent of schools in Providence, Rhode Island, was recently interviewed by Mary Neuman, director of the Leadership Development Institute and national coordinator for the Annenberg Challenge at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, about the new challenge to leadership.

*Mary Neuman:* It is clear that all of you believe that school leaders need to refocus their efforts more directly on student achievement. What seems to stand in the way of that kind of leadership?

*Diana Lam:* I think we need to establish a culture that says in this school or district, we are going to organize our efforts to increase student achievement. Schools and school districts have not traditionally been organized to support that goal. As a superintendent, I see my job as creating those conditions in the district that will give us a common language, a common framework,

a set of guiding principles for that work. It's one of the first steps toward seeing actual changes in the classroom.

James Gunn (2001) asserts that equity is the new administrative challenge. Equity in education is not fundamentally new to administrators but now has a higher profile. With equity being key to student achievement, Bryant and Houston (2002) suggest that it takes a team to raise student achievement. Team leadership for student achievement includes the school board and superintendent working together in setting a vision for schools, establishing standards, and identifying the assessment process to be used to measure student success. "It is also essential for the leadership team to create the right climate for schools, to provide an exciting learning environment for both teachers and students, and to develop a collaborative relationship within the community" (Bryant & Houston, 2002).

Since national attention has once again been focused on the relationship between race and academic achievement, this article has explored the notion that education is the great equalizer for all American youths and that reform measures and mandates are attempting to reach in an equitable manner the under-represented population of students that make up the public schools. Getting to the root of the achievement gap, by addressing it and making recommendations about how to close it, have brought about new challenges for educational leaders.

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