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RESEARCH-BASED OPTIONS FOR EDUCATION POLICYMAKING

The Purpose of Education: Truing the Balance Wheel¹

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Education then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men, the balance wheel of the social machinery.

Horace Mann, 1848

When our nation was young and figuring out how to make this little-known thing called democracy work, some power brokers of the day said the people were too ignorant to govern themselves. Thomas Jefferson disagreed. In 1820, he wrote,

I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves: and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their controul (sic) with a wholesome (sic) discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.²

Fewer than 30 years later, Horace Mann, the father of the common school movement, proclaimed universal education to be the bedrock of democracy. Education is the “great equal-

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izer of the conditions of men,” he said, and it deserves significant public investment at the local, state, and national levels.³ Mann passionately contended that education should be “universal, non-sectarian, free, and that its aims should be social efficiency, civic virtue, and character, rather than mere learning or the advancement of sectarian ends.”⁴ Jefferson and Mann had many shortcomings, but their belief in the power of universal education as a core requirement for democracy has been a fundamental and guiding principle for policymakers and the broader populace across the nation’s history.

“Thus, the purpose of education was to build, sustain and strengthen the society,”⁵ wrote Jennifer King Rice, the author of the NEPC policy brief that serves as the foundation of this paper. Unfortunately, with the ascendance of test scores and international economic competitiveness as education’s most loudly proclaimed purposes, the nation has forgotten that universal public education was established primarily for the benefits it provides to the common good. All citizens must be educated freely and equally because education is the bedrock of democracy. It is different from a private good or a market commodity.

We have made great progress in establishing a universal education system, as evidenced by graduation rates being at an all-time high.⁶ Yet, substantial disparities in educational resources, opportunities, and outcomes continue to undermine our vision—and ultimately our society.⁷

Unfortunately, pervasive inequalities in the nation are growing. “Trends in labor market outcomes demonstrate that disparities in American family incomes have been increasing over the past five decades. The income gap between families in the top and bottom 20 percent of the income distribution has increased in 2011 dollars from \$59,324 in 1947 to \$177,844 in 2010—an increase of nearly 300 percent.”⁸

Given the broad scope of inequities in schools and in society writ large, the most sensible approach would be to inventory the full range of social and economic needs, and address the multiple factors—which extend well beyond the traditional boundaries of schools—that contribute to the enduring and increasing opportunity gap that children experience in schools. Fair housing policies, investments in distressed neighborhoods, good jobs, and policies that reduce income disparities are all essential.⁹ Serious efforts to promote equal opportunity must be as broad and pervasive as the range of social and economic factors contributing to the current divide.

Misreading the achievement gap as an indicator of school failure rather than as a measure of unequal opportunities, some economists suggest that simply improving math scores will eradicate economic malaise.¹⁰ This mindset provided the rationale for the prevalent reform philosophy of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries: test scores will make the nation strong, and those scores can be improved by pedagogy and driven by punishments, regardless of the vast differences in student circumstances. This approach failed.¹¹

Broader reforms in schools and society are required.

Equalizing School Opportunities

While Mann considered education to be the “great equalizer,” recent court cases and adequacy studies show schools have been denied equitable and adequate fundamental resources.¹² Given the unequal circumstances, our neediest schools must receive the greatest support.

Particular attention must be paid to the following:¹³

- **Effective teachers and principals:** Teachers are the most important “within the school” factor. Sound leadership is essential, most especially in high-poverty and low-performing schools.
- **Appropriate class size:** The research evidence is clear that smaller classes yield the greatest gains for poor and minority students.
- **Challenging and culturally relevant curriculum and supportive instructional resources:** Tracking and inconsistent access to advanced courses generates unequal educational opportunities.
- **Sufficient quality time for learning and development:** Although school days are somewhat uniform, instructional time is considerably less for lower socioeconomic children.
- **Up-to-date facilities and a safe environment:** Facilities affect learning, and the neediest children currently endure the most inadequate facilities.

Expanding the Scope

Out-of-school variables are better predictors of test scores than school factors. Because the neediest children are systemically deprived of the rich learning opportunities and other learning advantages that more privileged students routinely enjoy, expanded opportunities and services for poor children must be provided.

- **Extended time for learning and development:** The summer academic loss of less affluent children is a clear indicator of the difference in the quality of informal learning experiences. “Students from more affluent backgrounds are exposed to learning resources including books, computers, museum visits, and other social, cultural, and academic experiences.”¹⁴
- **High quality early childhood education and services:** Perhaps the highest return on investment in education comes from universal, publicly funded, high-quality preschool.
- **Community schools and wrap-around services:** “School-based programs that offer medical and dental care, psychological support, recreational activities, and social services for all children have long been shown to significantly impact students’ ability to benefit from educational offerings.”¹⁵

Truing the Balance Wheel

Coupled with the resegregation of schools and the disequalizing effects of privatization, fair and equal educational opportunities have been denied to half the nation’s children, threatening their futures—and our own. Undermining meaningful universal education, the very bedrock of democracy, inevitably and increasingly weakens the fabric of democratic society.

Therefore, it is recommended that:

- Policymakers and the general public embrace the broad goals of education, including civic responsibility, democratic values, economic self-sufficiency, cultural competency and awareness, and social and economic opportunity.
- Policymakers ensure that *all* schools have the fundamental educational resources they need to promote student success: effective teachers and principals, appropriate class sizes, challenging and culturally relevant curriculum and supportive instructional resources, sufficient quality time for learning and development, up-to-date facilities and a safe environment.
- Policymakers expand the scope of schools in high-poverty neighborhoods to provide wrap-around services including nutritional supports, health clinics, parental education, extended learning time, recreational programs, and other services needed to meet the social, physical, cognitive, and economic needs of both students and families.
- Policymakers promote a policy context that is supportive of equal opportunity: focus testing on formative rather than high-stakes purposes, prevent or repeal policies that allow for school resegregation, and renew the public commitment to *public* education.

As John Dewey stated in 1912, “What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon it destroys our democracy.”¹⁶

Notes and References

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