
See No Evil, Hear No Evil, Stop No Evil:

How do we uncover and combat the lack of educational opportunity for the American poor?

SARAH M. STITZLEIN

EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

EDUCATION IS OPTIMISTICALLY DESCRIBED as “the great equalizer of the condition of men.”ⁱ Most Americans believe that education is one of the best ways to ensure opportunity and overcome poverty in America.ⁱⁱ On average, the amount of quality education one receives correlates directly with one’s income. Moreover, in the postindustrial world, educational attainment carries with it power, perceived merit, and social status. It is no surprise, then, that schooling is depicted through the image of a ladder of social mobility used to climb out of poverty.

Unfortunately, it is the very idea of meritocracy coupled with pervasive inequalities in educational opportunities that further entrench the cycle of poverty. As noted scholar of class inequality Allan Ornstein explains, “Because of socioeconomic deprivation and limited education, poor and minority groups are unable to compete successfully in a society based on educational credentials and educational achievement.”ⁱⁱⁱ While there certainly are redeeming aspects of meritocracy, it currently justifies the positions of the intellectual elite, mollifies the working poor, and perpetuates the status quo. In order for the American Dream and the standard of meritocracy to be more than unattainable propaganda, we must ensure that equal educational opportunity is being extended to all citizens, regardless of upbringing or location.

Troubling New Patterns

Disturbing new research confirms that the achievement gap between wealthy and poor students is growing at alarming rates.^{iv} Additionally, “The achievement gap between black and white children, which narrowed for three decades up until the late years of the 1980s—the period in which school segregation steadily decreased—started to widen once more in the early 1990s when the federal courts began the process of resegregation by dismantling the mandates of the *Brown* decision...the gap in secondary school remains as wide as

ever.”^v These data are influenced by the fact that race and class are often connected and achievement depends on the opportunity for quality education.

While schools in neighboring Boston, for example, moved effectively toward integration following the court order of Judge Wendell Arthur Garrity in 1974, today Boston schools and schools across the country have swung to the other side of the pendulum. They are now facing the highest rates of class and race segregation since the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision in 1954. For example, “more than a quarter of black students in the Northeast and Midwest, attend schools which we call apartheid schools in which 99 to 100 percent of students are nonwhite.”^{vi} While certainly well known to these students, resegregation is largely occurring without the knowledge of many people, especially white and/or wealthy residents of states like our own. As schools become increasingly white or non-white, rich or poor, the wealthy are even farther removed from the experiences of the struggling poor or from the enriching opportunities of growing up alongside those who are different from oneself.

Unequal Educational Opportunity

The differences between the quality of education offered at various schools is startling. Poor or racial minority schools tend to have far fewer resources, outdated facilities, less qualified teachers, lower performance rates, higher drop out percentages, and fewer graduates who pursue higher education.^{vii} On the other hand, “the whiter and wealthier a school’s enrollment, the more likely it is to have well-paid and experienced teachers, a healthy budget, new facilities, small class sizes, few disciplinary problems, a well-stocked library, challenging and advanced instruction, high expectations of students, and parents who are active and influential in its affairs.”^{viii}

Despite the fact that poor and minority students often require extra resources to overcome the lack of

cultural capital and enrichment in the home, the gap in per pupil expenditure between wealthy schools and poor schools and the gap between white and predominantly minority schools averages is large. Let's look at an example from our own backyard. In the 2006-2007 school year the amount of money spent on each student in Newington school district (2005 average family income of \$67,700) was \$25,356.69 and the amount spent in Farmington school district (average family income of \$41,800) was \$8,470.10. That difference alone (\$16,886.59) is more than the average annual amount of money spent on each student throughout the entire state of New Hampshire. In other words, the money spent on one student in Newington would fund about three students in Farmington. Or consider that Dresden school district (with less than 1% of its students eligible for free and reduced lunch—a key marker of poverty) spends \$5,590.80 more per pupil than Franklin school district (with nearly half of its students receiving free or reduced lunch). These differences affect everything from the quality of programming offered in the schools to the teachers who are enticed to work there. For instance, Dresden's starting teacher salary is the highest in the state and tops that of Farmington and Franklin by \$8,000. The discrepancies in the opportunities extended to students also relate to inequities in outcomes. Students at Franklin and Farmington are nearly 12 times more likely to drop out as students at Dresden and 31/2 times less likely to enter a four year college upon graduation.^{ix}

Inequalities in K-12 schooling are connected to differences in access to higher education opportunities and future for upward mobility. While many people believe that the chances of earning a college degree have increased considerably, this is only true for the wealthiest half of children.^x This is partially due to the fact that the federal government reduced the amount of scholarships and grants to poor and working class college students by 75 percent between 1980 and 2004, thereby making attending college less feasible.^{xi} Relatedly, while inflation-adjusted incomes for the poorer half of America have remained stagnant, private college tuition is up 110% and state college tuition is up 60%.^{xii} Some poor students turn to alternative starting points for higher education by enrolling in community colleges that are more affordable and where their high schools alma maters may be seen as less of a shortcoming in admissions decisions. While many would commend these students for their effort, there is not really much opportunity for these students to climb the ladder. Only 0.4% will eventually make it into a selective

public college where they can earn a degree that will significantly improve their future income over that of a community college graduate.^{xiii}

Differences in educational opportunity are further exacerbated by recent educational policy. While noteworthy efforts were put forward in the 1960s and 1970s to ensure equal educational opportunity, the major movements of *A Nation at Risk* (1983) and *No Child Left Behind* (2001) shifted the emphasis from equality to excellence. Even though NCLB was admirably intended to insure that students from all backgrounds receive quality education, it mandates the same levels of excellence for all schools through punitive measures, punishing (and in the most dire cases, closing down) schools and students from the worst starting positions. Additionally schools struggling to meet adequate yearly progress on mandatory testing (which are overwhelming poor and minority schools) often resort to pedagogical approaches than instill basic concepts rather than advanced knowledge or critical thinking skills. This further limits the abilities of and job opportunities open to graduates of these struggling schools.

Regardless of whether a school is struggling to meet the requirements of NCLB, racial minority students are particularly at risk for educations geared toward basic knowledge through disproportionate placement in the lower ends of tracking programs. Again let us look at our own area, this year at Nashua High School North where Hispanics, who make up 10% of students taking science, comprise only 3.5% of advanced science courses and a whopping 27% of foundations level courses. While some onlookers might assume that these differences are due to proficiency in the English language, the overwhelming majority of those Hispanic students were born in the United States and are fluent English speakers. These numbers demonstrate inequality in the type of education being offered and point toward the perpetuation of social class reproduction insofar as minority students are far more likely to be placed in a basic level of education.

See it, Hear it, Stop it

Some residents of largely homogenous New Hampshire tend to be less knowledgeable about issues of racial resegregation, because racial difference is rarely seen and cries of racial inequality are not often heard. Additionally some view social class struggles as a problem of remote northern New Hampshire or of particular dilapidated cities in the south. While many poor have expressed their frustrations, others are too busy trying to make ends meet to engage in such activities or have

found outlets for expression to be ineffective. The way we classify and respond to poverty depends on how much of it we see and acknowledge. Given the disparities revealed here, we must recognize our problems at home and elsewhere. Let's start a conversation and work together to fulfill the promise of equal educational opportunity, to make meritocracy more just, and to avoid further entrenchment of the cycle of poverty.

One way for students to join this conversation is to enroll in the following courses: EDUC 700 Educational Structure and Change, (my course) EDUC 705 Contemporary Educational Perspectives, SOC 745 Race, Ethnicity, and Inequality, SOC 797 Poverty and Inequality, and WS 405 Gender, Power, and Privilege. Additionally, students might consider volunteering their assistance through tutoring, mentoring, or coaching at schools that struggle to provide resources in the area. Another option is to investigate avenues for reworking the currently illegal system of school funding by property tax in New Hampshire to make it more equitable. Finally, students might talk with one another about how their own educational experiences could have been better through greater integration and economic justice in the schooling system.

References

- i Horace Mann, *Twelfth Annual Report*, 1820.
- ii Allan Ornstein, *Class Counts: Education, Inequality, and the Shrinking Middle Class* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 117.
- iii Ibid., 99.
- iv Peter Sacks, *Tearing Down the Gates: Confronting the Class Divide in American Education* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 112.
- v Jonathan Kozol, "Still Separate, Still Unequal," *Harper's Magazine*, September 2005, 54.
- vi Jonathan Kozol, *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America*. (Crown Publishers, 2005), 19.
- vii Gary Orfield, *Historic Reversals, Accelerating Resegregation, and the Need for New Integration Strategies*. UCLA Civil Rights Project, 2007.
- viii Peter Schmidt, *Color and Money: How Rich White Kids are Winning the War over College Affirmative Action* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 42.
- ix All data available from the New Hampshire Department of Education.
- x Sacks, 118.
- xi Ornstein, 18.
- xii Ibid., viii.
- xiii Ibid., 82.