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# Closing the Opportunity Gap

What America Must Do to Give Every Child an Even  
Chance

Prudence L. Carter, Kevin G. Welner

CLOSING THE OPPORTUNITY GAP

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CHILD AN EVEN CHANCE

*Edited by Prudence L. Carter and Kevin G. Welner*

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*To all the children who dare to dream even in the face of adversity and  
to the adults who work courageously to tackle that adversity*

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## Contents

Acknowledgments ix

Contributors xi

1. *Achievement Gaps Arise from Opportunity Gaps* 1

*Kevin G. Welner and Prudence L. Carter*

2. *Lack of Achievement or Loss of Opportunity?* 11

*Gloria Ladson-Billings*

PART I | OVERCOMING THE OBSTACLES WE CREATE FOR CHILDREN

3. *Educationalizing the Welfare State and Privatizing Education:*

*The Evolution of Social Policy since the New Deal* 25

*Harvey Kantor and Robert Lowe*

4. *Housing Segregation Produces Unequal Schools: Causes and Solutions* 40

*Gary Orfield*

5. *Why Children from Lower Socioeconomic Classes, on Average,*

*Have Lower Academic Achievement Than Middle-Class Children* 61

*Richard Rothstein*

PART II | OVERCOMING THE OBSTACLES WE CREATE FOR SCHOOLS

6. *Inequality and School Resources: What It Will Take*

*to Close the Opportunity Gap* 77

*Linda Darling-Hammond*

7. *Achievement Gaps Start Early: Preschool Can Help* 98

*W. Steven Barnett and Cynthia E. Lamy*



8. *How Common Standards and Standardized Testing Widen the Opportunity Gap* 111

*Christopher H. Tienken and Yong Zhao*

9. *A More Perfect Union: Reconciling School Choice Policy with Equality of Opportunity Goals* 123

*Janelle Scott and Amy Stuart Wells*

PART III | OVERCOMING THE OBSTACLES WE CREATE FOR EQUALITY

10. *Student and School Cultures and the Opportunity Gap: Paying Attention to Academic Engagement and Achievement* 143

*Prudence L. Carter*

11. *Meeting the Needs of Language Minorities* 156

*Patricia Gándara*

12. *Tracking, Segregation, and the Opportunity Gap: What We Know and Why It Matters* 169

*Karolyn Tyson*

13. *Good Schools and Teachers for All Students: Dispelling Myths, Facing Evidence, and Pursuing the Right Strategies* 181

*Barnett Berry*

PART IV | SOLUTIONS/CONCLUSION

14. *The Cumulative Costs of the Opportunity Gap* 195

*Clive Belfield and Henry M. Levin*

15. *Enhancing a Nation's Democracy through Equitable Schools* 207

*Michele S. Moses and John Rogers*

16. *Building Opportunities to Achieve* 217

*Prudence L. Carter and Kevin G. Welner*

Notes 229

References 257

Index 303

## *Acknowledgments*

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CLOSING THE OPPORTUNITY GAP



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# 1

## Achievement Gaps Arise from Opportunity Gaps

*Kevin G. Welner and Prudence L. Carter*

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THE DAILY HEADLINES tell a sad and frustrating story. “Failing schools shut down.” “Replacement schools failing.” “Replacement schools shut down.” With each passing year, the students in these schools fall further behind—behind students in other Western democracies and behind American students in more advantaged neighborhoods.

This problem has not been ignored, but neither has it been addressed sensibly and meaningfully. With great fanfare, it has been misdiagnosed and mishandled. Like a gardener trying to increase her fruits’ growth merely by weighing them anew each day, we have measured and documented multiple test-score gaps, but we have never mounted a sustained effort to attend to the gaps in sustenance—in opportunities—that must be addressed before we can expect to see meaningful progress.

Educational disparities and intergenerational economic inequality are highly correlated with skin color, ethnicity, linguistic and social class status. To be sure, the march toward civil rights and access to opportunity has seen notable successes over the past fifty years. Yet many of these successes have only been superficial. They merely prompted a morphing of the nature and sources of inequity, rather than a meaningful change in life chances.<sup>1</sup> The longer that lower-status groups have been denied equal access to opportunities, the more inequality has compounded the adverse effects on these groups—in some cases, rendering it difficult to catch up in subsequent generations. A recent study from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development shows the United States to have among the lowest levels of intergenerational social mobility—and one of the highest levels of

influence of parental socioeconomic status on students' achievement and later earnings.<sup>2</sup> The "opportunity gap" that exists across racial and associated class lines is expansive, and it widens as income and wealth inequality continue to rise.

Yet it is the disparities in certain achievement indicators that have dominated policy discussions over the past two decades; relatively little attention has been paid to disparities in opportunity. Current discussions of the "achievement gap" highlight and emphasize significant differences in school results between groups based on measured outcomes such as test scores and graduation rates. The persistent test-score gaps in our schools include those between African Americans and Whites, between Latinos and Whites, between students in poverty and wealthier students, between children of parents with little formal education and with greater formal education, and between English learners and native English speakers. The results seen in our schools are shocking. For example, the average White 13-year-old reads at a higher level and performs better in math than the average Black or Latino 17-year-old.<sup>3</sup> Similar gaps exist for other important outcomes, such as rates of high school and college graduation.

The US national high school graduation rate stands at 78 percent for the class of 2010, the most recent year for which data are available.<sup>4</sup> This is the highest the rate has been since 1976. But for members of historically disadvantaged minority groups, the picture is not nearly as positive. While White and Asian American students had graduation rates at 93.5 and 83 percent, respectively, the rates for African American and Hispanic students landed at 66.1 and 71.4 percent, respectively.<sup>5</sup> The dropout rate for Hispanics and African Americans is more than double the national average. In the largest metropolitan areas, at least half of students who attend public high schools do not graduate.

Failure rates are also telling; one in five African American students will fail a grade in elementary or secondary school, compared to the overall rate of one in ten. Even the classes that students of color do take and pass are often diluted.<sup>6</sup> Similar patterns are found in college preparatory enrollment, where only a third or less of African American, Latino, and Native American students are enrolled in such classes, compared to half or more of Asian American and White students.

Further, many of our African American and Latino youth are embedded in the school-to-prison pipeline that continues to expand. African American youth constitute 45 percent of juvenile arrests, although they make up only 16 percent of the overall youth population.<sup>7</sup> Their criminalization begins early in school: K-12 Black students are twice as likely as their White peers to be suspended from school and three times as likely to be expelled.<sup>8</sup> First-time offender Black students are far more likely than first-time offender White students to be suspended, even given the same offense.<sup>9</sup> This crisis is particularly acute among males.

The “opportunity gap” frame, in contrast, shifts our attention from outcomes to inputs—to the deficiencies in the foundational components of societies, schools, and communities that produce significant differences in educational—and ultimately socioeconomic—outcomes. Thinking in terms of “achievement gaps” emphasizes the symptoms; thinking about unequal opportunity highlights the causes. Learning and life chances depend on key out-of-school factors such as health, housing, nutrition, safety, and enriching experiences, in addition to opportunities provided through formal elementary and secondary school preparation, as Richard Rothstein explains in chapter 5. While school quality is extremely important, these out-of-school learning and learning-related resources and opportunities for children who live and grow in the nation’s many disadvantaged communities must improve significantly before we can realistically expect to see achievement gaps close.

Opportunity and achievement, though inextricably connected, are very different goals. For instance, while not every American will go to college, all American children should be given fair opportunities to be prepared for college. This equitable principle lies at the core of American schooling and can be traced back at least as far as Horace Mann’s celebrated call in the mid-nineteenth century for schools to be the “great equalizer” and the “balance wheel of society.”<sup>10</sup> We are far from that ideal. Vast opportunity gaps limit children’s future prospects every day in schools in almost every community across America. Talent is being wasted, particularly among those living in poverty and in disadvantaged communities of color. Children in these communities are not reaching their full potential and are not “closing the gap” in achievement—precisely because they are not receiving equitable and meaningful opportunities to reach that potential. Recent policy has attempted to solve problems on the cheap, looking for magic beans and silver bullets instead of investing in the key community needs and classroom resources necessary to create engaging, supported learning and learners.

A narrow focus on the achievement gap predictably leads to policies grounded in high-stakes testing, which in turn leads to narrow thinking about groups of students, their teachers, and their schools. While these assessments attempt to determine where students are, they ignore how they may have gotten there and what alternative pathways might be available for future students. Schools, principals, and teachers are told that they have “no excuses” and that they will be held accountable for results. Similar pressure is exerted on students. This accountability, however, is rarely extended to those making these demands. Policy makers are not required to provide supports necessary for equitable learning opportunities, nor are they held accountable for the consequences of these tests, such as those described by Tienken and Zhao in chapter 8 of this volume.

The predictable litany of achievement gaps cannot be a surprise to anyone who recognizes and understands these opportunity gaps. Moreover, the obsessive focus on measuring achievement through pencil-and-bubble tests while ignoring opportunity has led to a mountain of unintended consequences, many of which are apparent in the fallout from the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Students, teachers, principals, and schools are sanctioned when they produce low test scores, with policy makers hoping that the threat of sanctions will drive efforts that are more steadfast and adroit. Flying under a “no excuses” banner, this reform movement took an important and admirable first step by calling on educators to maintain high expectations for all students. But it never took the next crucial step: holding policy makers accountable for ensuring the conditions and resources necessary to create and maintain a system of excellence that offers universal opportunity. As a result, disadvantaged students are now caught in a downward cycle, facing poverty-related obstacles outside school as well as a system that generates a constant churning of teachers, principals, and schools. Even if it is called “accountability,” this turmoil should not be mistaken for progress; in fact, it often results in just the opposite.

In this book we operate on the assumption that denying children equitable educational opportunities is bad policy and is inconsistent with basic American values. The denied opportunities described in the following chapters place unnatural constraints on the healthy growth of disadvantaged children. Outcome gaps that would otherwise not be nearly as troubling become appalling when they are systematically imposed upon targeted groups within our society.

Importantly, discussions of both achievement and opportunity gaps sensibly begin with the premise that we as a nation must act to redress the serious inequities that exist between and within schools, as well as among the different people, groups, and communities across the country. Both discussions include an understanding that outcomes should be measured, analyzed, and addressed. But test-score and attainment differences will not disappear until policy is dedicated to changing the conditions that shape and impede achievement.

According to demographic forecasts, Blacks and Latinos combined will make up a majority of the US population by the middle of the twenty-first century.<sup>11</sup> Unless we close the opportunity gaps described throughout this book, significant numbers of youth from these backgrounds will not be adequately prepared for higher educational attainment and subsequent leadership roles in society. Today, a college diploma is what a high school diploma became in the mid-twentieth century: the foundational credential for access to opportunity. In an increasingly knowledge-based economy, young adults require specialized skills, especially those providing opportunities amid the persistent forces of globalization. In the United

States and other developed countries, the economy requires graduates with strong math, science, and literacy skills. But these skills are not evenly or fairly distributed across groups within the country. Many of the nation's selective colleges and universities find themselves competing intensely over the limited "supply" of college-ready Black and Latino high school graduates while the vast majority of these students are never adequately prepared.<sup>12</sup> This problem is compounded by the fact that many students of color who are accepted into college do not have the financial capacity to attend.<sup>13</sup> The current economic downturn and diminishing higher-education budgets further threaten access to postsecondary education. The college attendance rates of African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans point to what should already be claiming our attention: the ongoing salience of racial, ethnic, and class inequalities in American society and education.

The reality is stark: many children of color are denied crucial resources and opportunities, substantially harming their likelihood of attaining educational and life success. Although some members of historically disadvantaged groups will defy the odds and thrive, the overall standing of these social groups will remain lower if the ecology of their lives—the system that maintains the components for overall healthy educational well-being—does not evolve more effectively. The achievement gap discussion of recent decades has obscured and even ignored these needs; the contributors to this volume do not.

Because students' learning experiences and outcomes are deeply affected by many factors that are outside schools' immediate control, schools must become part of a larger effort to address unequal opportunities if they are ever to become Mann's great equalizers. In a pluralistic and democratic society, schools must respond to students' actual needs, build on their unique strengths, be culturally responsive, and provide the opportunities necessary to give every student a fair chance at academic success.

Yet we as a society also need to understand that the fair and sensible provision of educational resources among schools (including funding and teacher quality), while absolutely necessary, is not sufficient to cast out inequality. Sometimes the presumed effects of resource-rich schools are countervailed by other social factors. Racial, ethnic, class, and gender dynamics that pervade the wider society permeate school walls with great ease. In chapter 12, for example, sociologist Karolyn Tyson calls our attention to the contradictions embedded in schools with more material resources. Students of different social groups may attend "good" schools together, but the segregation that often occurs within them belies claims of equal opportunity. In many schools, African American, Latino, and Native American students are rarely exposed to the upper-echelon college preparatory classes. Tyson powerfully documents the interplay between the structure of tracking and students'

own behavior, showing how people tend to “know their lines” and cling to classes, spaces, activities, social networks, and neighborhoods where others like them are likely to be.

Together, the chapters that follow construct a composite picture of an imbalanced opportunity structure that inexorably leads to massive differences in children’s overall educational trajectories. They describe how the well-being of children and their families has largely been ignored, as have basic schooling inequalities tied to racial segregation, poverty, and native language. In a fundamentally unequal and unfair system characterized by widespread poverty and segregation, opportunity gaps are exacerbated when children are assigned to schools with substantially fewer resources than those in nearby middle-class communities. If the nation has any hope of addressing larger societal inequalities through the public education system, the opportunities provided within the school walls will have to be extraordinarily enriched; instead, they are pitifully curtailed.

The relative lack of attention paid to measuring or addressing inequitable opportunities helps to explain why policy has failed to engage with the hard work of facing the challenges and providing the supports and resources that lead to improvements in student learning. While the nation’s leaders have concentrated almost exclusively on an achievement gap policy whereby students, teachers, and schools are measured and sanctioned, they have left untouched the vast opportunity gap—a gap that is even more at odds with American ideals.

To explore these and other fundamental ideas, this book brings together experts from across the nation. They offer concise, research-based essays that together paint a powerful and shocking picture of denied opportunities. These experts describe sensible policy approaches that are grounded in evidence and can restore and enhance opportunities.

The book is divided into three main parts, each of which looks at a particular type of obstacle and how it can be overcome: obstacles we create for children, those we create for schools, and those we create for equality. It concludes with a look at the cumulative economic costs of the opportunity gap and a consideration of the importance of equitable schools to a healthy democracy. Gloria Ladson-Billings sets the stage for all three parts in chapter 2, where she introduces readers to the concept of the opportunity gap and the idea of an “education debt.” She explains that the achievement disparities we see in the United States are a result of historical, economic, political, and moral decisions that we as a society have made over time.

Part I, “Overcoming the Obstacles We Create for Children,” contains three chapters that place school learning within the larger set of children’s experiences, opportunities, and challenges. In chapter 3, Harvey Kantor and Robert Lowe describe how the nation’s approaches to poverty, race, and education have changed over

the past half century, as relatively weak compensatory education policies have been asked to shoulder the burden created by economic and racial inequalities—problems that our society and our policy makers have overwhelmingly failed to address. Kantor and Lowe help us to understand how twentieth-century social policies meant to alleviate poverty have mutated into programs that pose formal education as a panacea. They write that US policy makers began to “educationalize” big social problems.

Gary Orfield, in chapter 4, focuses on racial issues, explaining the intertwined character and baneful consequences of segregation in housing and schools. He describes how segregated neighborhoods are linked to segregated schools and produce unequal education. Then, in chapter 5, Richard Rothstein puts schooling inequalities within the larger context of disadvantages linked to poverty. When the nation essentially abandoned the nascent anti-poverty policies of the mid-twentieth century, it effectively locked in vast learning disadvantages that it then asked schools to overcome.

The four chapters in Part II, “Overcoming the Obstacles We Create for Schools,” describe how the demands we place on schools are often undermined by inequalities in resources and incentives. Linda Darling-Hammond, in chapter 6, explains the basic resource inequities that pervade the current system and describes how a more equitable distribution of resources can yield more equitable outcomes. Similarly, in chapter 7, Steven Barnett and Cynthia Lamy describe how access to high-quality early-childhood education is crucial for closing the opportunity gap.

No depiction of the educational system in today’s America is complete without understanding the role of standards-based, high-stakes testing and accountability policies. Chapter 8, coauthored by Christopher Tienken and Yong Zhao, describes how current policies exacerbate the conditions that afflict vulnerable children and consequently widen the educational opportunity gap. Then, in chapter 9, Janelle Scott and Amy Stuart Wells delve into the problems and potential of school choice in either exacerbating or alleviating the opportunity gap. They contend that school choice policies within a test-focused educational system can advance the goal of greater educational equity if they are conceptualized and constructed in a manner that acknowledges the structural inequality within which public schools exist today, and if they include sensible and powerful provisions to counteract the effects of those inequalities.

The chapters in Part III, “Overcoming the Obstacles We Create for Equality,” explain the ways in which the demands we place on educators and students are often undermined by school practices and norms. In chapter 10, Prudence Carter describes how cultural behaviors and practices both among youth and within schools matter to student engagement and achievement. Latent and explicit forms



of cultural inequality within schools and in wider society, Carter explains, exacerbate opportunity gaps. Chapter 11 explores the tremendous consequences of the under-education of students with a first language other than English. Patricia Gándara explains how current language policies are squandering an asset—students who have the great potential to be bilingual and biliterate—and turning it into a deficit. Students arrive at schools with a variety of different skills and experiences, but as Karolyn Tyson explains in chapter 12, schools can respond to those differences in ways that build on strengths and ensure opportunities to learn or by stratifying expectations and opportunities. She makes evident that capable students of color in racially diverse schools are severely underrepresented in advanced classes, contributing substantially to the opportunity gap. Such tracking practices have repeatedly been shown to be detrimental, yet they persist in most American secondary schools.

In chapter 13, Barnett Berry considers five common myths about schools and teachers. He also points to policy options that would lead to high-quality schools and teachers for all students. Because teachers are the most important in-school resource, the current national failure to invest in improving our teaching force and to equitably distribute this resource is contributing to the opportunity gap. These policies need not continue.

The book concludes with two chapters that put the opportunity gap in a larger context. In chapter 14, economists Clive Belfield and Hank Levin explore the overall costs of the cumulative opportunity gap, estimating that the economic benefit of closing the opportunity gap by just one-third would result in \$50 billion in fiscal savings and \$200 billion in savings from a societal perspective (for example, by lowering rates of crime and incarceration). By point of comparison, they note, total taxpayer spending on K-12 education, including national, state, and local expenditures, is approximately \$570 billion.

Finally, in chapter 15, Michele Moses and John Rogers place the importance of equitable schooling in the context of our nation's democratic ambitions and argue that democracy benefits from more racially integrated, robust, and equitable learning opportunities. They focus on the development of civic capacity and show how diverse classrooms can enhance students' preparation for democratic deliberation. They explain as well how the quality of our society is shaped by decisions about who goes to school together and how we distribute learning opportunities across different students and different schools. Chapters 14 and 15 explain how closing the opportunity gap is not simply a matter of equity and adhering to core American values; it also implicates our economic and democratic survival.

Taken as a whole, the chapters in this book lead to the inescapable conclusion that American educational policy—because it has generally ignored opportunity

gaps—has been captivated by perilous sirens and now veers toward the rocks. They highlight the discrepancies that exist in our public schools, focusing not on the gap in achievement but rather on how policy decisions and broader circumstances conspire to create the opportunity gap that leads inexorably to stark differences in outcomes. The much-discussed achievement gap, then, can best be understood as a predictable result of systemic causes—a representation of the disparities in opportunities available to children of different racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and cultural backgrounds. Where engaging, culturally relevant instruction is lacking, expectations minimal, and resources scarce, students from disadvantaged groups tend to be outperformed by their more privileged counterparts. These educational consequences are no surprise and can shine little light on either the ability of these students or our potential as a nation.

In contrast, by shifting the nation's attention toward the opportunities and resources students are offered, we can hold a productive discussion about how to meet our national goals. We do not mean to suggest that measuring outcomes is unimportant or should be halted. As researchers, we consider this information a key component in an evaluative feedback loop, helping policy makers understand which needs are being met and which are not, as well as which policies and practices are most successful. Opportunity gaps and achievement gaps are tightly linked in a logical chain: the impetus for our current fixation on testing is found in the academic disparities between students of different racial and class backgrounds, and those disparities are due to opportunity gaps. But measuring outcomes does not directly generate meaningful improvement, nor—as we have learned through our experiences with No Child Left Behind—does improvement arise merely by attaching demands and sanctions to those outcomes.

In the imbalanced education policy world of today, we are told that poor children—who are less likely to possess the family, neighborhood, and material resources that we know improve test scores and other measures of achievement—have no excuses for not performing as well as middle-class and affluent children. To visualize how unfair this system has become, imagine two children asked to race to the top of a stairway. One child is well-nourished, well-trained, and well-equipped; the other lacks all these basic resources. But, instead of designing a system around the needs of this second child, her stairway (akin to the minimal opportunities and resources available at her school) is steep and slippery. Meanwhile, the first child's stairway is replaced with an escalator. Holding these two children to the same standards may allow for a comforting “no excuses” sound bite, but it does nothing to help that second child achieve.

In truth, as Patricia Gándara illustrates in chapter 11, children with perceived disadvantages are *not* one-dimensional; they arrive at our schools with important

assets that educators can build on. But the core reality remains: children who are growing up in poverty, children of color, and children whose native language is not English are deprived of many valuable supports, high-quality teachers, stable housing, safe schools and neighborhoods, up-to-date textbooks, health care, one-on-one tutors, expensive test-prep programs, and so much more. Students who excel on tests have often been exposed to vastly different economic and social realities beyond the classroom than those who do not. The sad irony is that in such an inequitable context, the ways we now define academic success may very well threaten the well-being of millions of school-aged children who President George W. Bush famously said were subjected to the “soft bigotry of low expectations.” High expectations become a punitive false promise if combined with low resources, low opportunities, and low supports.

*Do you know what it means to miss New Orleans,  
And miss it each night and day?  
I know I'm not wrong, the feeling's getting stronger,  
The longer I stay away.<sup>1</sup>*

## 2

### Lack of Achievement or Loss of Opportunity?

*Gloria Ladson-Billings*

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THE GRAVELY, RASPY voice of jazz great Louis Armstrong is unmistakable. Before August 29, 2005, “Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans” was just another romantic song about a place. It was like Frank Sinatra singing “New York, New York,” or Count Basie’s band playing “April in Paris.” We enjoyed the melodies and sang along, but the lyrics held no special significance for us. Now, after the horrific events surrounding Hurricane Katrina, many hear Armstrong’s question in an entirely different way.

I remain fixated on the social consequences of Katrina. The category 5 storm burst through the levees and flooded close to 80 percent of the Big Easy. The near-total collapse of social services left thousands stranded in their homes and in hospitals, nursing homes, and inadequate shelters. Hardest hit were the old, the young, the poor, and the African American residents of the city’s famed 9th Ward. The real tragedy was not the storm but the complete failure of local, state, and federal systems in its wake. The evacuation plan made no provisions for people without private transportation or the money to pay for temporary housing. The lack of communication among governmental agencies was appalling. The federal response was disgraceful. Six years later, reconstruction plans have faltered. Currently, many people are living in substandard housing, and far too many remain homeless. According to Reckdahl, 23 percent of New Orleanians are homeless, one of the highest percentages of any major city.<sup>2</sup>

What do these facts about Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans have to do with education? When the storm hit, I was attending a meeting in London, so I

witnessed the disaster and subsequent suffering from an international vantage point. Watching and hearing about what was occurring was surreal. Londoners repeatedly asked me, “What is going on in your country?” Initially, I was dumbfounded. As the reality of the disaster began to sink in, I realized that Katrina and its aftermath are a metaphor for the situation in which many poor people of color find themselves. Later, when Londoners asked what was happening in *my* country, I responded, “Well, now they’re wet!” I said this to point to the horrible conditions of housing, employment, health, and education that existed in New Orleans for poor people and people of color, especially African Americans, before Katrina. Katrina made those inequities visible and gave us a unique opportunity to address reform from the ground up.

Except for its catastrophic cause, the situation in New Orleans schools resembles what is happening in urban public schools everywhere. The denigration and derogation of African Americans is without parallel. The symbolic and cultural abasement that Americans of African descent endure is rooted in the material reality of living well below the national standard throughout the course of US history. We must think about the opportunity gap against this backdrop.

The “achievement gap” has become a shared preoccupation of Americans across the political spectrum. Disparities between White students and their Black and Latino counterparts show up on the National Assessment of Educational Progress and on state and local tests, as well as in rates of graduation, dropping out, suspension, expulsion, and assignment to special education. In the greater New Orleans area alone the statistics are startling:<sup>3</sup>

- High school dropouts from the class of 2007 alone will cost the nation nearly \$329 billion in lost wages, taxes, and lifetime productivity.
- 91 percent of Black fourth graders in Louisiana do not read at grade level.
- School suspensions rates for Black students in Louisiana are twice those of their White counterparts.
- Today, 21 percent of all Louisiana Black males between the ages of 19 and 64 are currently either incarcerated or under probation of parole supervision.
- At the beginning of the twenty-first century, one out of every six Black Louisiana males had been incarcerated during his lifetime. If current trends continue one out of every three Black males born today can expect to spend time in prison during his lifetime.
- The typical inmate upon entry into the correctional system is a Black male in his thirties who is living in poverty, has not finished high school, and functions at a fifth-grade level; is uninsured, unemployed, and lacks job training and skills; is substance addicted; and has either a diagnosable

mental illness, a chronic or infectious disease or a combination of health conditions.

- Almost one-half (45%) of Louisiana's children have a parent under the supervision of the corrections system.

Ample empirical evidence demonstrates that Black and Latino students perform at levels significantly lower than White students. The question is whether what we are encountering is an achievement gap or something else.

For almost five years, I have been writing and speaking about what I call the "education debt." How we frame an issue is at least as significant as the argument we make about it.<sup>4</sup> Calling the persistent achievement disparities between Black and Latino students and White students a "gap" suggests that something inherent in Black and Latino students, their families, communities, cultures, schools, and teachers is responsible for the disparities. Today, teachers and their unions are the main villains in the achievement gap narrative. Although I agree that some aspects of each of these elements might contribute to the problem, I think it is shortsighted and incomplete to target them as the only causes. These achievement disparities are a result of historical, economic, political, and moral decisions that we as a society have made over time.

#### DEBT VERSUS DEFICIT

One of the ways to understand the debt metaphor is to draw an economic analogy. When the federal government budgets for more spending than anticipated revenues, we acknowledge that it is operating under a deficit. The accumulation of deficits over time creates the national debt. Deficits reflect current problems; debt reflects long-term financial problems. Deficits are this generation's issues; debt belongs to generations to come.

In the world of educational achievement, year-to-year testing represents the deficit. We "budget"—that is, plan—for a certain level of student performance, but students regularly perform at lower levels. The long-term failure to produce equitable conditions to address these deficits creates the education debt. The idea of an education debt is not simply metaphorical. Economists calculate the loss of productivity (see Belfield and Levin, chapter 14, this volume), the need for remediation, the drain on social services, and the increased costs of law enforcement and imprisonment that result as a lack of educational attainment.

Unfortunately, school districts, states, and the nation are obsessed with the year-to-year progress scores. Each spring, newspapers and news broadcasts alert

the public to the slightest rise or fall in annual test scores. The public reacts to these statistics, even if it is not informed as to whether or not the changes are statistically significant. Are the scores up or down? Who is winning, and by how many points? How can we raise the scores of the “losers?” I contend that the only way to truly understand achievement disparities is to understand the larger context in which they developed. Next, I will briefly explore the historical, economic, socio-political, and moral antecedents of our current educational situation and address some of the ongoing research and practical efforts toward remedying it.

#### ONCE UPON A TIME

The history of education in the United States has been one of idealism and disappointment. David Tyack’s classic history of American urban education, *The One Best System*, points out that the United States engaged in a bold experiment to educate all its citizens regardless of social class, rooted in Thomas Jefferson’s dream of an educated citizenry capable of governing itself.<sup>5</sup> However, this provision did not initially extend to African Americans. During slavery it was illegal to teach enslaved persons to read. After emancipation, northern missionaries established schools under the auspices of the Freedmen’s Bureau to teach basic literacy skills.<sup>6</sup> African Americans were instrumental in founding schools; the 100-plus historically Black colleges and universities across the country attest to their commitment to educating themselves and subsequent generations.

Once Reconstruction was ended, some former Confederate states established separate schools for Blacks that operated only during the agricultural growing season. During the planting and harvest seasons, children’s labor was needed to help their families eke out a living. Even in cities such as Birmingham, Atlanta, and New Orleans, Black children attended segregated schools taught by Black teachers and received cast-off, outdated, school books and materials from the White system. This deliberate inequity helped to create the disparities that continue today. After the 1954 US Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the White establishment found ways to maintain segregation. Whites created private “academies,” some supported with taxpayer monies, and refused to send their children to newly desegregated public schools. The Nixon administration made the dismantling or at least the rolling back of school desegregation one of its highest priorities. This “Southern strategy” led to Republican electoral victories and the re-creation of the “solid South,” the bloc of “red states” below the Mason-Dixon line.

The North deserves no commendations for its policy toward the education of African Americans. In most states, segregated neighborhoods resulted in de facto

segregation. Shortly after the *Brown* decision, the Eisenhower administration pushed through the Interstate Highway Act, which enabled middle-income White families to move to the suburbs, away from Blacks and poor Whites.<sup>7</sup> According to Schwartz, “No federal venture spent more funds in urban areas and returned fewer dividends to central cities than the national highway program”;<sup>8</sup> and Linville asserted, “Official housing and highway policies . . . have helped to produce more intensely concentrated and racially segregated landscapes of contemporary urban America.”<sup>9</sup> Today, most Black and Latino public school students attend schools where Blacks and Latinos are in the majority. The schools that serve children of color remain substandard. Exclusion is also part of the historical experience of Latinos, Native Americans, and poor Whites, particularly those in rural areas.

#### FOLLOW THE MONEY

The nation’s historic refusal to provide Black, Latino, Native American, and poor White students with access to quality education is linked to the financial disparity that exists between school districts. Since schools are funded largely by property taxes, communities with more highly valued property receive more tax revenue and can spend more money. Jonathan Kozol has documented the funding inequities that exist between urban schools serving a majority of Black and Latino students and suburban schools serving middle-class White students.<sup>10</sup> Even when in subsequent years urban schools lobbied for and received more money from state and federal governments and philanthropists, they were so far behind their suburban counterparts that the increased funding has failed to make up for the long-time disparity. Impoverished school districts can be hard-pressed to demonstrate improvement in conventional ways because their needs are so great.

Getting an overall picture of funding inequity is difficult because we often work with state-level data. Unfortunately, we regularly see within-state differences that are larger than between-state differences.

Inequity among districts means that children in lower-funded districts do not have access to the same resources—modern buildings, technology, highly effective teachers, supplemental supports, etc.—than do their peers in districts with higher levels of funding. Furthermore, low-income children and English language learners need extra resources to overcome disadvantages due to socioeconomic status or lack of English language proficiency. In many cases, not only are these children not receiving equal resources but they are also not receiving the extra supports they need in order to succeed.<sup>11</sup>



The Education Trust reported that the highest-poverty districts in 25 states received less state and local per-pupil funding than the lowest-poverty districts. My contention that the economic disparities are compounded over time is born out by the school funding data. States like New Jersey devote a higher percentage (5%) of their total taxable resources to education than a state like Louisiana (2.9%), but within those states there are districts (e.g., Camden, New Orleans) that are even more disadvantaged.<sup>12</sup>

Under the No Child Left Behind Act, all students from grades 3 to 8 are required to take annual standardized tests. States determine which tests to use and what constitutes a passing score. Variations in standards mean that a student who earns a passing score in one state could be considered failing in another. In urban schools serving large numbers of Black and Latino students, preparing for the test has become an all-consuming activity (see Zhao and Tienken, chapter 8, this volume). Subjects such as art, music, and physical education get short shrift when schools focus solely on basic skills. Schools spend an inordinate amount of money on test preparation, purchase, scoring, and security. Devoting additional funding primarily to assessment does not reduce the education debt.

#### GIVE US THE BALLOT

The third aspect of the education debt is the political debt. African Americans were disfranchised in many southern states until the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Black voter participation then rose; however, many states prohibit people with a felony conviction from voting, which depresses the voting strength of African Americans. In the case of Latinos, lack of access to information in Spanish can inhibit participation.

For these groups, political participation on school boards makes the most difference. However, current education reform efforts emphasize mayoral control of local schools. The mayors of New York City, Chicago, Philadelphia, and the District of Columbia control their school districts, attesting that having the mayor run the school district does not guarantee success.

Hurricane Katrina swept away most of the public schools in New Orleans, creating an opportunity to reconstruct the entire system. Education reformers seized the opportunity by proposing charter schools and alternative certification programs for teachers. Today, there are three governing agencies for New Orleans schools: the Recovery School District (RSD), the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB), and the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE). RSD and OPSB administer both traditional public schools and charter schools, while BESE administers two

charter schools. KIPP (Knowledge is Personal Power), First Line, and the University of New Orleans operate some of the charter schools. New Orleans is also known for employing alternatively certified teachers. However, according to the Louisiana State Department of Education, these teachers rarely stay in the district. Retention among Teach for America (TFA) teachers in the state is .04 percent, while retention among traditionally prepared teachers is 40 percent. Decisions about New Orleans schools have been made with little or no input from the electorate. Lack of political power has been an ongoing pattern for Black, Latino, and poor communities and constitutes another aspect of the education debt.

#### DO UNTO OTHERS

The final component of the education debt is what I call the “moral debt.” It cannot be quantified or measured, but it is real. There is something deeply un-American about not allowing entire groups of people to participate equitably in an educational system that allegedly provides an opportunity for social and economic advancement. The nation recognized this injustice when President John F. Kennedy proposed and President Lyndon B. Johnson instituted the policy known as affirmative action. Johnson argued that it was unfair to keep people shackled for centuries, unshackle them, and then expect them to compete against those who have never known such restrictions.

Johnson’s decision was motivated by both politics and economics: African Americans were starting to vote in larger numbers and to constitute a larger segment of the Democratic Party, and the nation needed to increase the scientific and technical knowledge and skills of its citizens in order to compete globally. But the policy also had a moral dimension. How could a nation that called itself the champion of freedom and justice justify its failure to redress the legacy of centuries of exclusion and discrimination? Affirmative action had striking political and economic results. William G. Bowen and Derek Bok demonstrated that affirmative action policies in college and university admissions almost single-handedly created today’s Black middle class.<sup>13</sup> Bowen and Bok also point out that African American and Latino professionals trained in that era were more likely to choose work and/or volunteer opportunities in low-income communities serving Blacks and Latinos.<sup>14</sup>

Although many people bemoan the loss of civility in public discourse and national debate,<sup>15</sup> the real problem is that our discussions about morality remain centered on the individual. We want people to take personal responsibility for their health care, welfare, and education, but we neglect our social obligations.