# Inequality Is the Problem: Prioritizing Research on Reducing Inequality

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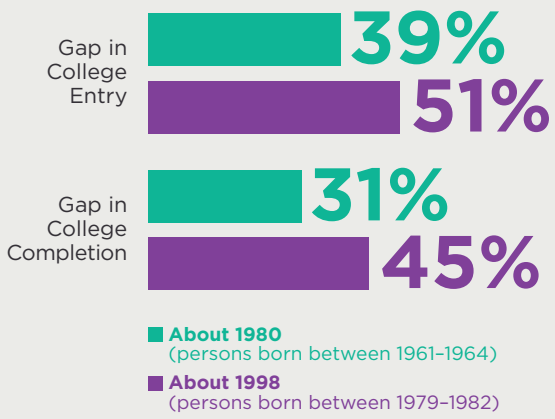
"Once a Leader, U.S. Lags in College Degrees." So rang out a recent headline in the *New York Times* (Lewin 2010). In the 1980s, young people in the United States were more likely to attend and complete college than those in any other nation, but that record has long since been eclipsed. By 2008, 15 other countries had higher proportions of persons between the ages of 25 and 34 with college degrees (Organization for Economic Development and Cooperation [OECD] 2010).

What lies behind these numbers? Is this a story of a stalled society—or of unequal progress across the nation? Further investigation reveals that whereas, on average, 41 percent of U.S. 25- to 34-year-olds hold associate or bachelor's degrees, rates of degree completion are much lower in many states. For example, New Mexico, West Virginia, Louisiana, and Arkansas have rates below 30 percent, far behind on the global scale (Lee and Rawls 2010). Meanwhile Massachusetts, at 54.4 percent, would have ranked fourth in the world rankings.

The disparities are not just geographic. While persons from economically advantaged backgrounds have always gone to college at higher rates than their less-privileged peers, these gaps have expanded since the 1980s (Lee and Rawls 2010). Whereas the difference in college entry between students in the top and bottom income quartiles was 39 percentage points around 1980, it was 51 percentage points by about 1998 (see Figure 1, adapted from Bailey and Dynarski 2011). And differences in college entry between white and Asian students on the one hand and African American and Hispanic students on the other have also widened in recent years (Carnevale and Strohl 2010).

Inequality in education and other domains of life stands in the way of economic and civic progress in the United States. It forestalls social mobility and economic productivity and impairs social cohesion. As a result, national and international leaders—from big-city mayors to Pope Francis—recognize that, as President Obama (2013) put it, inequality is "the defining challenge of our time."

**Figure 1. Changes Over Time in College Entry and Completion by Family Income: Differences in Percentage Points between the Top and Bottom Income Quartiles.**




*Source: Adapted from Bailey and Dynarski (2011), Figure 6.2, p. 120.*

Although inequality is pervasive, it can be addressed. One way to reduce inequality over time is to lessen the effects of inequality in one generation on the outcomes of the next. If we can help children from low-income families succeed in school, for example, we may be able to improve their job prospects in the future. Today, we have some good ideas about how to meet this challenge, but there is much more to learn. Hence, the William T. Grant Foundation recently

announced a new initiative to support research on programs, policies, and practices that reduce inequality in youth outcomes in the academic, social, behavioral, and economic realms.

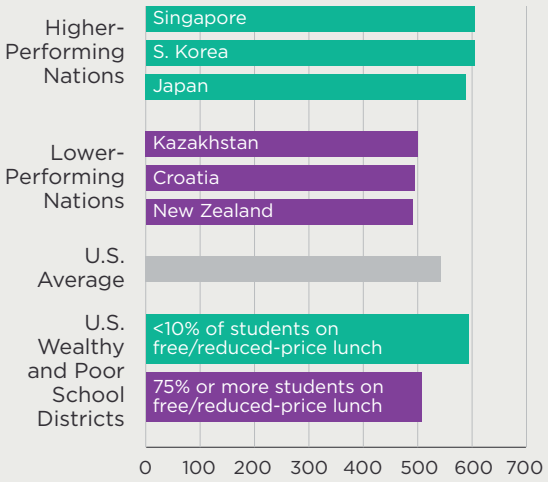
Our interest in inequality extends to many areas of youth development, reflecting disparities in arenas beyond education such as mental health, criminal justice, and workforce development (Alegria, Vallas, and Pumariega 2010; Fader, Kurlychek, and Morgan 2014; Schwartz, Ferguson, and Symonds 2010). This essay uses educational inequality to highlight new ways of thinking about inequality, key leverage points for reducing inequality, and the potential for research to develop more effective responses to inequality.

## Growing Achievement Inequality

As with college enrollment, international comparisons of academic achievement often miss the main story. Most headlines focus on the mediocre performance of U.S. students (e.g., Layton and Brown 2012), but this emphasis fails to detect the key problem: test scores in the United States are too unequal. Compared to other countries, the dispersion of achievement in the United States is exceptionally wide, and it is tied to differences in students' economic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds.

Examples of wide disparities are easily discernable if one probes beneath the averages. For instance, on the 2011 Trends in Mathematics and Science Study (TIMMS), a survey of mathematics and science performance in 55 nations, U.S. fourth graders ranked near the middle in mathematics, comparable to many northern European nations but far below international leaders such as Singapore, S. Korea, and Japan (Provasnik et al. 2012). Yet when the U.S. sample is restricted to school districts with fewer than 10 percent of students on free and reduced-priced lunch—that is, districts with fewer poor students—average scores were equal to those of the top-scoring countries. At the same time, in school districts with 75 percent or more of students on free and reduced-priced lunch—those with the highest concentrations of economically disadvantaged students—average scores were much lower, comparable to lower-performing countries such as Kazakhstan, Croatia, and New Zealand (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Mathematics Test Scores in Selected High- and Low-Performing Nations and in Rich and Poor School Districts in the United States: Fourth Grade Scores on the 2011 Trends in Mathematics and Science Study**




*Source: Adapted from Provasnik et al. (2012) Tables 3 and 8, pages 10 and*

Differences in academic outcomes by socioeconomic origins, as well as by race, ethnicity, and immigration status, have long been recognized. *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, a 1966 landmark study of more than 600,000 young people in schools across the United States, established this point definitively, demonstrating that differences in academic outcomes were more closely tied to students' family backgrounds than to the schools they attend (Coleman et al. 1966). These findings have been replicated repeatedly over the past five decades (Gamoran and Long 2007). The recent rise in test-based accountability across the United States has highlighted another dimension of inequality: differences among states. By linking the National

Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, a test administered to a sample of students across the nation) to international benchmarks, researchers at the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) revealed that state performance levels ranged from those that nearly equaled the world's highest performing nations (e.g., Massachusetts, Vermont, Minnesota, New Jersey, and New Hampshire) to those with scores well below the U.S. average and lower than nearly any other western nation (e.g., Mississippi and Alabama) (NCES 2013; see also Hanushek, Peterson, and Woessmann 2012).

Achievement differences by income levels have become particularly pronounced in the United States at the present time. As Reardon (2011) has shown, the achievement gap between children from families at the 10th and 90th income percentiles has increased over the last 50 years, and it is now double the size of the black-white achievement gap. Indeed, family income is now as important as parents' education in predicting children's school success. In a recent international study of literacy, socioeconomic differences in performance were greater in the United States than in any other nation (OECD 2013).

## Consequences of Inequality

The United States lags behind the top-scoring nations at every performance level, so the mediocre performance of U.S. schoolchildren does not merely reflect low scores at the bottom of our achievement distribution (Hanushek, Peterson, and Woessmann 2010). Yet it is the prevalence of low performers—more than the dearth of high performers—that is most problematic for economic progress and civil society. Among nations tested, the United States leads the world in the number of low-achieving students and in the number of high performers (Petrilli and Scull 2011). This occurs in part because the population of the United States is large, and in part because the degree of inequality is high. In other words, even though our high-achieving students tend to score lower than the highest achievers of the top-performing nations, we still have an extraordinarily large number of high achievers. As a result, the markers of elite accomplishment in U.S. society are likely to persist. For example, we produce more Nobel Prize winners than any other nation (Bruner 2011; Stephens 2013) and we establish almost as many patents each year as all other nations combined (U.S. Patent and Trademark Office 2012). The U.S. system of higher education continues to be the envy of the world as evidenced by continuing waves of international student enrollment (Project Atlas 2013) and our scientific infrastructure is unparalleled (National Science Board 2012). The prospects for sustained economic and scientific leadership are strong, despite the pressures of international competition (National Research Council 2007).

Meanwhile, students who do not achieve even a basic level of academic performance, or do not complete at least a high school education, are limited in their capacity to contribute to the U.S. economy (Goldin and Katz 2010). Thus, even though our students' average scores fall below those of their counterparts in the highest-performing nations at every achievement level, it is the prevalence of low achievers rather than the shortfall of high achievers that gives greatest cause for alarm. As Belfeld and Levin (2012, p. 2) explained, "purely from an economic perspective—leaving aside important questions of social equity—opportunity is being lost on a large scale."

The drag on economic progress is not the only reason to be concerned about unequal school performance. Educational inequality is also socially divisive, for at least three reasons. First, as sociologists have long recognized (e.g., Durkheim [1925] 1973; Parsons 1959; Dreeben 1968), schooling provides a common socializing experience that forges bonds despite differences in origins. When young people from different backgrounds experience different levels or types of education, schooling cannot instill shared values throughout the U.S. population. Second,

schooling can create social networks that cross the boundaries of families and communities, and these networks help knit the fabric of American society (Putnam 2000; Stiglitz 2012). Third, of course, educational outcomes predict future economic outcomes, so as education becomes increasingly stratified by social origins, the prospects for social mobility across generations are diminished (OECD 2011; Corak 2012).

While it is widely agreed that inequality is a problem, economists continue to debate how bad the consequences are and what degree of inequality is necessary to motivate performance (e.g., Mankiw 2013; Solow 2014). The society-wide consequences of inequality are difficult to pin down. International comparisons show correspondences between, for example, high levels of income inequality and low levels of social mobility, but the causal links between these conditions are open to debate. At the individual level, however, there is no question that young people who are born into economic and social disadvantage have fewer opportunities for advancement and lower educational and occupational achievements in adulthood.

**Efforts to reduce inequality in youth outcomes come in at least three forms:**

- **"Programs"** are coordinated sets of activities designed to achieve specific aims in youth development.
- **"Policies"** are broader initiatives intended to promote success through the allocation of resources or regulation of activities. Policies may be located at the federal, state, local, or organizational level.
- **"Practices"** consist of the materials and activities through which youth development is enabled (e.g., coaching, mentoring, parenting, peer interactions, teaching). Practices involve direct interaction with youth (though not necessarily in person, as technology affords direct interaction from anywhere).

## Social Policy Research Can Help

At the William T. Grant Foundation, we are convinced that social science research on youth development can play an important role in addressing the challenge of inequality. We think that the degree of inequality and its effects on youth outcomes are both amenable to changes in policies, the introduction of new programs, and implementation of gap-closing practices, and moreover that high-quality research can identify approaches that help reduce disparities. Our approach to inequality is distinctive in that it combines the following elements:

- We invest in **research** that addresses inequality.
- We focus on **young people** ages 5–25.
- Although we recognize that no single study will lead to major changes, we intend that the studies we fund will culminate in **approaches that work to reduce inequality**—hence our attention to programs, policies, and practices.
- We have a long tradition of supporting **tools** that prove useful to a wide range of researchers.
- Our portfolio is broadly **interdisciplinary**, drawing on ideas and tools from sociology, psychology, and beyond.

As a private foundation, we have a unique opportunity to help build a body of evidence that can contribute to meeting the challenge of inequality. Moreover by focusing simultaneously on the use of research evidence as our other main interest, we can support the emergence of knowledge about how evidence on programs, policies, and practices that reduce inequality may lead to action.

## SOCIAL POLICY AND INEQUALITY

The year 2014 marks the 50th anniversary of President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, and the news is filled with analyses of this national effort. Clearly, the War on Poverty has not been "won." About 15 percent of Americans are under the poverty level, including nearly 22 percent of children. This includes especially high rates among African American children (37.5 percent) and Hispanic children (33 percent) (U.S. Census Bureau 2013, CLASP 2013). Yet poverty would be even more widespread had social policies not emerged to fight off its grip. Policies such as social security, food stamps, school lunches, the earned income tax credit, housing assistance, and unemployment insurance have held back the throes of poverty to a meaningful degree even as fiscal crises have gripped the country (Bailey and Danziger 2013). These initiatives have provided an economic floor for some—but clearly not all—Americans struggling to make ends meet. Far less has been done to limit inequality on the other end of the spectrum, as income levels among the top 20 percent of earners have continued to rise, largely unimpeded by tax policies or other approaches. Nonetheless, the success of anti-poverty programs shows that inequality can be mitigated by social policy. Similarly, federal policies that eliminated overt discrimination in areas such as housing and education reduced inequities based on race, although much more is needed in this area as well. For example, racial gaps in school performance declined markedly during the 1970s and 1980s. At least in part, this was likely due to policies such as school desegregation and class size reduction (Gamoran 2001), but the remaining gaps have been largely persistent (Magnuson and Waldfogel 2008).

No less dramatic and perhaps even more lasting are programs, policies, and practices that reduce the *effects* of unequal circumstances on the opportunities and outcomes of the next generation. High-quality early education programs give children from poor families and families of color a boost (e.g., NICHD Early Child Care Research Network and Duncan 2003), although these benefits may be lost as children advance in school (Puma et al. 2012), probably because these children attend lower quality schools (Lee and Loeb 1995). Programs that promote healthier parenting also elevate children's chances as they enter school (Kitzman et al. 2010). Family-school engagement programs aid children's socioemotional functioning by reducing family stress and helping parents and children feel more comfortable in school (Gamoran et al. 2012). Classroom instructional practices that combine higher-order skills with a supportive climate elevate the performance of low-achieving students (Crosnoe et al. 2010). Small classes in the early elementary grades not only enhance the learning of all students, but help reduce gaps by giving an extra boost to students of color. This is either because class size reduction especially benefits such students—as was the case in Tennessee (Finn and Achilles 1999)—or because it is a policy that can be targeted toward schools with high concentrations of low-income minority students, as was initially the case in Wisconsin (Molnar et al. 1999). Other statewide efforts to reduce class size have not fared as well, apparently because they were not accompanied by sufficient resources such as space and high-quality teachers (Milesi and Gamoran 2006). Meanwhile, several programs funded under the U.S. Department of Education's Investing in Innovation (i3) initiative are now bearing fruit (Sparks 2013). These include prominent efforts such as Teach for America, Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) Academies, the comprehensive school reform program Success for All, and the one-on-one tutoring program Reading Recovery.

Among older youth, activities undertaken to enhance students' beliefs in their abilities to succeed are moving from the laboratory to the classroom. There is increasing evidence that these practices can reduce racial and ethnic achievement gaps (Walton and Cohen 2011; Hanselman et al. 2014). As more and more young people complete high school, policies are beginning to confront the challenge of access to postsecondary education, where gaps between socioeconomic, racial, and

ethnic groups are wide. Need-based financial aid (Harris and Goldrick-Rab 2011), assistance with financial aid forms (Bettinger et al. 2012), and information about applying to college (Turner and Hoxby 2013) have supported college enrollment or retention of low-income students.

These are but a few examples of programs, policies, and practices that have demonstrated benefits for youth. They illustrate that the constraints of disadvantage are not unbreakable. What strategies might we pursue to increase the extent and coherence of successful programs and ultimately reduce the effects of inequality on young people's prospects?

### RESEARCH ON EFFORTS TO REDUCE INEQUALITY AND THE EFFECTS OF INEQUALITY ON CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Each initiative cited above was supported by a long process of experimentation and evaluation. Similar efforts are needed to increase the number and scope of programs, policies, and practices that reduce disparities in young peoples' outcomes.

With all these examples of success, why does inequality remain so high, and why are its effects growing? At least two reasons are paramount for the persistence of inequality and its effects. First, although effective responses have emerged, they are modest compared to the scope of the problem. No single program or policy will close the achievement gap or eliminate outcome disparities in mental or physical health, education, juvenile justice, or social mobility. Rather it will take a constellation of efforts to achieve discernable progress. Second, programs take time to yield impact. The benefits of evidence-based school reform, for example, often do not emerge until a reform has been in place for three to five years (Borman et al. 2003; Bryk et al. 2011), and the effects of high-quality child care may not reveal themselves for a decade or longer (Schweinhart et al. 2005).

Whereas the programs discussed above are supported by credible evidence, many other plausible programs have fallen short of their intended outcomes. Moreover, even when average effects are promising, implementation decisions do not rest so much on effectiveness, but on what works for whom and when. For example, Weiss, Bloom, and Brock (2013) explained that the effectiveness of a program may depend on a variety of contextual conditions, such as the availability of similar programs. Likewise, Hanselman et al. (2014) demonstrated that an intervention designed to mitigate "stereotype threat" (the internalized sense that members of one's own social group tend to perform poorly on a high-stakes task) may be more effective in a high-threat context, such as a school with a wide achievement gap. This sort of nuance is important for identifying programs and policies that may reduce inequality in particular contexts, but it also increases the challenge for research studies that must examine multiple contexts.

## Conclusions

The salience of inequality in the United States is widely recognized, and voices from many spheres are calling for efforts to combat inequality. Prior research and development demonstrates that social policies can reduce inequality and its effects on young people, yet the current level of inequality shows that past efforts have left us with wide disparities. Substantial new efforts are needed to identify approaches that will reduce inequality in youth outcomes so that a generation from now, both the degree of inequality in society and the effects of inequality on outcomes for youth will have diminished.

Through our new research initiative, the William T. Grant Foundation has pledged to play a role in this effort. We recognize that no single study will bring about change. Our hope, however, is that knowledge will eventually accumulate from many studies—those we support and those supported by others—which will point the way to real solutions to our pressing problems. We will continue to draw attention to inequality in young people's academic, social, behavioral, and economic outcomes. We have

commissioned five papers to address key issues: the first will set an agenda for research on social inequality and the others will examine inequalities through the lenses of immigration and education, mental health, criminal justice, and workforce development. The papers will be released on our website and discussed through other venues. Our site will also host a blog that will include ongoing reports and commentaries about the challenges of and responses to inequality. And of course, we invite researchers to look to us for funding to build, understand, and assess promising approaches to reducing inequality. In these ways, we hope our work will make a meaningful contribution to meeting this "defining challenge of our time."

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