



**UNDERSTANDING EDUCATIONAL EQUITY AND EXCELLENCE AT SCALE**  
*A Project of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform*

# School Reform and Second-Generation Discrimination

## *Toward the Development of Equitable Schools*

Pedro A. Noguera



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In his seminal work, *Inequality* (1972), Christopher Jencks argues that Americans are confused about the concept of equality. He suggests that while there is considerable support for the notion of equality of opportunity, there is far less support for the idea of equality of results.

The pursuit of greater equality with respect to educational outcomes and long-term results is what equity, as practiced – or at least aspired to – in the context of schools, is largely about. As schools and districts struggle with efforts to raise student achievement and reduce disparities in student outcomes, it is clear that many educators and the broader public remain divided and confused about what it means to place equity at the center of reform efforts and what it might take to move in the direction of equality in results. Most of this opposition is due to the perception that any effort to promote the educational interests of disadvantaged students will come at the expense of the most privileged. Since the most privileged students tend to have the most powerful parents, in most places the pursuit of equity loses out.

Before proceeding with a discussion of equity in *results* and how we might get there, it is important to remember that we remain a long way from achieving equality of educational *opportunity* in the United States. Although public schools are by far the most accessible institutions in the United States and, in fact, constitute the only form of public entitlement to which all children, regardless of their status, have guaranteed access, they remain profoundly unequal.

With respect to funding, the quality of facilities, personnel, resources, and schools throughout the United States are characterized by what Jonathan Kozol (1991) has called “savage inequalities” in his book of the same name. Despite several lawsuits, this issue remains largely unresolved, and there is little evidence that political leaders at either the federal or state level have much interest in pursuing it. Ironically, even as the federal government has endorsed the principle of educational equity through No Child Left Behind by holding schools and students accountable to common academic standards through high-stakes testing, it has done very little to address the inequitable conditions under which children learn. In fact, despite all the attention to standards, no state government has adopted basic opportunity-to-learn standards – similar, for instance, to standards for highways or utilities – for which it can be held accountable.

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## “Second-Generation” Causes of Inequitable Learning Conditions

In his latest book *The Shame of the Nation*, Kozol (2005) reminds us yet again that despite past struggles over bussing and desegregation, there is considerable silence about the persistence of racial segregation in American education. Yet, silence among policy-makers has not eliminated the salience of race as a source of controversy in educational policy. Instead, as attention has shifted away from efforts to desegregate schools, a number of “second-generation” discrimination issues have risen to the surface (Meier, Stewart & England 1989).

These second-generation issues, which are in some ways a by-product of the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision, represent a new front in the effort to promote racial justice in education. Unlike the first-generation forms of discrimination, where the issues were literally Black and White, the second-generation issues are typically more complicated. The inability of schools to address these issues has completely undermined efforts to promote racial justice in education – the very efforts that were, theoretically, the primary justification for the *Brown* decision.

### ***Tracking***

Tracking, along with other forms of so-called ability grouping that have the effect of segregating students within schools, is typically cited as an example of a second-generation discrimination issue. The practice has garnered considerable attention because of the ways in which tracking typically results in resegregation of students within schools and denial to students of basic opportunities to learn from competent teachers (Wheelock 1992).

Tracking also tends to limit the ability of students of color to enroll in rigorous courses, such as algebra, that lead to college (Oakes 1985). Despite numerous studies demonstrating its harmful effects upon student achievement and attainment, tracking continues to be practiced widely throughout the United States. Even at a time when students are expected to meet common standards, they are, because of tracking, generally educated under different and unequal circumstances.

### ***Labeling and Sorting through Testing***

The various ways in which students are labeled and sorted as a result of testing practices constitute another form of second-generation discrimination. The disproportionate number of minority students who are categorized as “learning disabled” and placed into special education programs is often cited as one of the methods school districts employ to remove and isolate students from the academic mainstream (Orfield & Losen 2002). In many school districts, bilingual-education and English-as-a-second-language programs also have a resegregating effect (Noguera 2001). It is not uncommon to find students who are identified as English-language learners assigned to remedial classes that are staffed by unqualified teachers.

Such practices are often carried out by educators who claim to be “helping” students with special needs, even though all available evidence indicates that such “help” is having the opposite effect: the longer those students who have been labeled and separated spend in special programs designed to “help” them, the further they fall behind. The prevalence of such practices is also a reflection of the widespread bias against immigrants, who often lack the skills and ability to serve as effective advocates for their children.

### ***Inequitable Disciplinary Practices***

Finally, there is a tendency within many school districts to subject minority students, particularly low-income African American males, to disproportionate amounts of punishment. Based, ostensibly, upon their desire to maintain a safe and orderly environment, a number of school districts engage in disciplinary practices that result in large numbers of minority students being suspended and expelled from school (Noguera 2003). Following the school shootings that occurred in the late 1990s at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, and other locations, several states and school districts adopted “zero-tolerance” laws.

Ironically, these laws have resulted in large numbers of poor minority students being targeted for punishment, even though the shootings occurred in affluent, White suburban communities. School discipline is an equity issue because in most places, the neediest students are disproportionately targeted for punishment and because exclusion from the classroom – a practice that generally exacerbates learning deficiencies – is the primary form of punishment utilized.

### **Unmet Nonacademic Needs of Poor Children**

In addition to these important forms of second-generation discrimination that limit and constrain the ability of schools to pursue equity in results, there is also the matter of the unmet nonacademic needs of poor children. In a society where one-fifth of all children come from families whose household incomes fall below the poverty level, large numbers of children arrive at school poorly nourished and lacking access to basic health and social services.

In his book *Class and Schools*, Richard Rothstein (2004) points out that we could make headway in closing the achievement gap without ever touching schools if we simply ensured that all children who needed them had access to eyeglasses and dental care and had lead paint removed from their homes. Yet, there is presently no national effort under way to address the basic needs of poor children in a comprehensive manner, and, despite compelling evidence that providing children with high-quality early childhood learning experiences provides benefits that extend across their lifetimes, there is no effort to significantly expand preschool, either.

## Supports for Students through Community Partnerships

In the absence of federal and state leadership to support the needs of poor children and families, schools that serve large concentrations of poor students must adopt partnerships with external agencies that enable them to meet student needs. In most areas, churches, community-based organizations, and local governments have resources and expertise that schools could utilize to meet student needs. Several schools have found ways to get social workers, dentists, doctors, and nurses to make regular visits to their schools. A number of schools have also pursued “second shift” strategies that allow them to remain open in the evenings for tutoring, recreation, and adult-literacy programs.

Known as *Beacon* and *full-service* schools, such efforts have transformed schools into community centers. They work because they make it possible for school personnel to concentrate on meeting the academic needs of students while not ignoring other pressing needs (Dryfoos 2001). The best of these models begin with a clear memo of understanding between the school and the community-based organization to clearly delineate roles and responsibilities and to reduce possibilities for conflict over turf. The Children’s Aid Society and Harlem’s Children Zone in New York City offer two different models that are costly, but worthy of further study and emulation.

Schools that work closely with community agencies also gain access to adult mentors, tutors, and role models who can provide support to students in need. This is particularly important in schools where the majority of teachers are from race and class backgrounds that differ significantly from their students. While such schools should make efforts to recruit a diverse teaching and administrative staff, they can also utilize adults based in the community who have greater familiarity with the background and culture of the students they serve. Many of these adults have greater insight into the challenges students face outside of school, and their life experiences often provide them with a form of “moral authority” that is absent in many schools.

## The Responsibility of Schools as Equalizers of Opportunity

Pursuing greater equity in schools will undoubtedly be an upstream struggle that is fraught with difficulty, because our nation remains so unequal. We must recognize that the sources of inequity typically lie outside of schools – in parent education and income, in community access to jobs and resources. Closing these gaps is much more difficult and, in the absence of a national effort to pursue equity in other areas, it is unlikely that schools will succeed on their own.

Still, the effort to promote equity is consistent with the basic promise of American public education – that schools should function as equalizers of opportunity (Sizer 1984). No matter how difficult and elusive, the goal of equity remains one that schools must pursue if they are to remain viable as public institutions.

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