



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

From Adequacy to Comprehensive Educational Equity

Toward a Realistic Agenda for Equity and Excellence

Michael A. Rebell



www.annenberginstitute.org/equity

About Understanding Educational Equity and Excellence at Scale

This essay is part of the Web site *Understanding Educational Equity and Excellence at Scale*, a project of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University. The site grew out of a forum convened by the Institute in 2006 which brought together a group of prominent education advocates and stakeholders to create a powerful, integrated framework that would reconcile divergent ways of defining educational equity and excellence, along with differing – and sometimes competing – views about which strategies work best to promote high-quality education for *all* students.

Please visit www.annenberginstitute.org/equity for more essays, multimedia materials, and interviews containing definitions of *equity* and *excellence* and descriptions of strategies educators today are employing. We invite you to participate in the dialogue by using the site's interactive features.

About the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University

The Annenberg Institute for School Reform is a national policy-research and reform-support organization at Brown University that focuses on improving conditions and outcomes in urban schools, especially those serving disadvantaged children. The Institute works through partnerships with school districts and school reform networks and in collaboration with national and local organizations skilled in educational research, policy, and effective practices to offer an array of tools and strategies to help districts strengthen their local capacity to provide and sustain high-quality education for all students.

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 Our founding fathers dreamed of a nation that would provide widespread educational opportunity to its children, and we have a long history of efforts to realize this goal. Over the years, the capacity of the public schools to educate the country's students has grown enormously. However, in spite of steady improvements in overall caliber of our public schools and the educational attainment of our citizens, wide achievement gaps persist between poor and minority students and their peers in other groups.

The reasons for these achievement gaps are clear. Poor and minority families' inequitable access to health care, stable housing, and early childhood education, among other resources, put their children behind their peers even before they begin school. Because these children attend schools that commonly receive less funding and have fewer qualified teachers, larger classes, lesser facilities, and poorer program offerings than schools attended by more affluent White students, they continue to fall further and further behind.

The chronic inequities that plague America's public education system have enormous costs to our nation. The annual price tag of inequitable education is in excess of \$250 billion per year in increased crime, compromised health, poor preparation for competitive employment, and lost tax revenue.¹ The heavy toll on the social and civic fabric of the nation is an additional, inestimable price that we all continue to pay every year.

The Need for Adequate Resources

The comprehensive impact of educational inequity calls for a comprehensive response. If we are to meet the global economic challenges of an increasingly "flat world," if we are to prepare our students to be capable civic participants in our democratic society, and if we are to fulfill the moral imperative of ensuring that a child's racial/ethnic, socio-economic, or family background no longer predict their access to educational opportunity or their level of achievement, we need to attend to the full array of factors that affect students' educational performance.

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¹ "The Social Costs of Inadequate Education," Symposium, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York City, October 24–25, 2005, <www.tc.columbia.edu/centers/EquityCampaign/symposium/resource.asp>.

Our nation's stated educational policy under the federal No Child Left Behind Act is to ensure that *all* of America's students are provided "a fair, equal and significant opportunity to obtain a high quality education" and to close "the achievement gap between . . . minority and non-minority students, and between disadvantaged students and their more advantaged peers." Many states, in implementing the act and adopting rigorous state academic standards, have proclaimed that virtually all children can learn at high levels, if provided the proper resources and supports. What is the proper level of resources and supports? All children require essential educational resources. In addition, educationally disadvantaged students require supports that address the range of social, economic, political, and psychological factors that indisputably affect children's readiness and ability to learn. To provide all children "a fair, equal and significant opportunity" and eliminate achievement gaps, we must establish children's right to educational essentials, and substantial attention must be paid to parent education, quality infant and preschool services, afterschool and other supplemental programs, children's health, concentrations of poverty, economic instability, and other such factors.

Over the last fifteen years, states have invested in reforms to raise standards for all children and in assessment systems that attempt to measure school and student success. But inequitable education finance systems continue to deprive many poor and minority children of even the basic educational tools necessary to meet standards. These fiscal inequities have stymied education reform for decades.

Ensuring Equitable Education Financing through Legal Action

In recent years, however, important progress has been made toward improving these students' opportunities and outcomes. Lawsuits challenging state methods for funding public schools have been launched in almost all of the states and these cases have been phenomenally successful: since 1989, plaintiffs have prevailed in twenty-one of twenty-eight cases (75 percent) that have sought to ensure that all students are provided the resources they need for a meaningful education and to meet the challenging new state standards. As a result of these cases, disparities in funding between affluent and poorer school districts have been narrowed substantially, and although it is still early to assess the substantive results in terms of improvements in student achievement, early returns from states such as Kentucky, Massachusetts, and Vermont indicate that the added resources that have been provided to poor and minority children have resulted in sizeable gains.

This movement to ensure adequate funding for a quality education began more than twenty-five years ago. Tying together and advancing a century of opportunity-oriented reforms, it has developed into the most vital present-day education-rights movement. The courts' rulings, based on their states' constitutions, have revived and enhanced the principles of the American public school tradition and established education as a child's inviolable right. Education adequacy cases have also reinforced the standards movement. By highlighting state educational

standards, promoting dialogue with state legislatures and education departments, and, most important, ensuring that schools have the resources and instructional capacity to provide all of their students, even those with more extensive educational needs, the opportunity for a quality education, these cases are pressing states to fulfill the promise of standards-based reform.

The Courts' Core Definition of an Essential Education

In addition, courts' pragmatic analyses have shown us that meeting higher proficiency goals requires states, localities, and the federal government to sustain a comprehensive educational enterprise. This enterprise must include adequate systemic funding based on actual costs; effective allocation of resources; and an accountability system that includes rigorous standards, multiple measures of school quality and student achievement, accurate information, and the ability to use test results and other school-quality data for school improvement.

Courts have arrived at a core constitutional definition of an *essential education* – a quality education that provides students with the essential skills they need to function productively in contemporary society. There is a virtual consensus among the many state courts that have dealt with this issue that:

- The constitutional standard for a basic quality education is one that prepares students to
 - function productively as capable voters, jurors, and civic participants in a democratic society; and
 - compete effectively in the economy.
- The types of knowledge and skills that students need to be effective citizens and workers are:
 - sufficient ability to read, write, and speak the English language and sufficient knowledge of fundamental mathematics and physical science to enable them to function in a complex and rapidly changing society;
 - sufficient fundamental knowledge of geography, history, and basic economic and political systems to enable them to make informed choices with regard to issues that affect them personally or affect their communities, states, and nation;
 - sufficient intellectual tools to evaluate complex issues and sufficient social and communication skills to work well with others and communicate ideas to a group; and
 - sufficient academic and vocational skills to enable them to compete on an equal basis with others in further formal education or gainful employment in contemporary society.
- The essential resources students need to acquire this knowledge and these skills are
 - qualified teachers, principals, and other personnel;
 - appropriate class sizes;
 - high-quality early childhood and preschool services;
 - adequate school facilities;
 - supplemental programs and services for students from high-poverty backgrounds, including summer and afterschool programs;

- appropriate programs and services for students with disabilities and for English-language learners;
- instrumentalities of learning, including, but not limited to, textbooks, libraries, laboratories, and computers; and
- a safe, orderly learning environment.

The state courts' core definition of an essential education is consistent with the broad understanding of the educational experiences needed by citizens in a democracy that has been advocated by governmental leaders and educators since our nation's founding. Its expectation that students entering the work force in the twenty-first century will need substantial conceptual and analytic skills echoes the perspectives of labor economists who have detailed the competitive requirements for productive employment in the globalized economy. Unfortunately, current federal requirements under the No Child Left Behind Act, which increasingly is driving educational policy at the state and local levels, focuses on a much narrower range of skills by holding schools accountable only for the particular literacy, mathematics, and science abilities that can be assessed through standardized examinations.

A Comprehensive Vision of Equity

The extensive evidence compiled during the trials of over two dozen education-adequacy litigations has made clear that poor academic performance, especially in urban and rural schools, is inextricably tied to the extreme insufficiencies in funding that plague most of these school systems. The research community overwhelmingly agrees that money, *if well spent*, will make an enormous positive difference in educational opportunity. Therefore, a feasible approach to comprehensive equity emphasizes first and foremost providing all schools the core resources they need to provide all their students the opportunity for a quality education. This is what the courts can do, and in many states it is what they are doing. We must continue to support these efforts. In addition, we must focus on the part of the problem that courts do not and cannot address.

Through research, policy initiatives, and outreach, the newly founded Campaign for Educational Equity at Teachers College, Columbia University, of which I am now executive director, will support the adequacy movement and build a comprehensive educational equity approach on its foundation. The Campaign will look into each social policy area that directly affects children's ability to learn and ask: What are the most critical and most feasible reforms that need to be undertaken? What better use of existing resources, or what new resources will be needed? Answers to these questions will not be buried in academic journals but will be promptly placed in the hands of policy-makers and practitioners.

To assess progress, the Campaign will issue an annual comprehensive educational equity report card that will provide, nationally and by state, appropriate measures relating to educational equity, including: the extent to which necessary resources and other inputs are being

provided in twelve core areas² that we have identified as necessary to achieve successful outcomes; and success in meeting eight critical goals that encompass the skills students need to succeed in competitive employment and/or higher education and to function as capable citizens.

We believe that this approach, which affirms and enforces students' constitutional educational rights and takes a hard look at what else is needed to put children on equal footing, is a practical way to approach equity in education comprehensively. Though this approach requires a significant investment, ultimately such a comprehensive vision of equity is, in fact, the only realistic way to proceed if we are to take seriously the legal and moral imperative to eliminate achievement gaps and promote educational proficiency for all of our students.

²The core areas are: challenging standards and rigorous curricula that provide students the skills necessary to succeed in higher education, in competitive employment, and to function as capable citizens; high-quality early childhood education programs (0–5 years); high-quality teaching; effective, sustained educational leadership; appropriate class sizes; appropriate programming, time on task, and academic support for English-language learners, students with disabilities, or educationally disadvantaged students; effective after-school, community, and summer programming; parental involvement and family education training; mental and physical health services; racial and economic integration; adequate school facilities; and adequate funding.