

EDUCATION WEEK

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Growing Gaps Bring Focus on Poverty's Role in Schooling

By **Lesli A. Maxwell**

The fractious debate over how much schools can counteract poverty's impact on children is far from settled, but a recently published collection of research strongly suggests that until policymakers and educators confront deepening economic and social disparities, poor children will increasingly miss out on finding a path to upward social mobility.

The achievement gap between poor children and rich children has grown significantly over the past three decades and is now nearly twice as large as the black-white gap, according to Sean F. Reardon, a Stanford University sociologist. He **examined data** on family income and student scores on standardized tests in reading and math spanning 1960 to 2007.

As the income gap has grown, so too has the disparity in how much money and time affluent parents invest in the development of their young children compared with such efforts by low-income parents. For example, between birth and age 6, children from high-income families now spend an average of 1,300 more hours in "novel" places outside their homes, schools, and day-care centers than children from poor families, a trend documented by Meredith Phillips, an associate professor of public policy and sociology at the University of California, Los Angeles.

The findings by Mr. Reardon, Ms. Phillips, and others appear in ***Whither Opportunity? Rising Inequality, Schools, and Children's Life Chances***, a volume of research published last fall by the New York City-based Russell Sage Foundation and the Spencer Foundation of Chicago that examines income inequality. The book illuminates, in multiple ways, how widening gaps in economic and social resources between rich and poor children over the past few decades have eroded public schools' ability to overcome those disadvantages.

Just how the new findings might influence the ongoing debate in education policy circles around how much poverty matters is not yet clear. They build on years of research showing that family income and other factors linked to children's socioeconomic resources are the biggest predictor of students' educational attainment.

Yet they also come as many education policymakers, philanthropic funders of school reform, and influential leaders, such as former District of Columbia schools chief Michelle A. Rhee, have zeroed in on promoting efforts to make teachers

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Comparing Achievement Gaps in Reading

The achievement gap has widened sharply between rich and poor students in the past three decades and is now twice that of the gap between black and white students.

and schools good enough to transcend poor children's difficult circumstances.

"It's true that there are schools that can make a difference even when family circumstances are extraordinarily difficult," said Richard J. Murnane, a professor of education and society in the Harvard Graduate School of Education, who co-edited the new volume with Greg J. Duncan, an education professor at the University of California, Irvine. "But upward mobility through the mechanism of a good education, which is a widely held value in this country that cuts across the political spectrum, is in serious jeopardy," Mr. Murnane added.

'No Excuses'?

The debate around the relationship between poverty and success in school—which has played out in scholarly forums and on the front lines of education for decades—gained fresh intensity in the era of school accountability that began with the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act a decade ago.

To some observers, the debate became more polarized in 2008 with the emergence of two distinct, though sometimes overlapping, "camps" emphasizing different policy prescriptions.

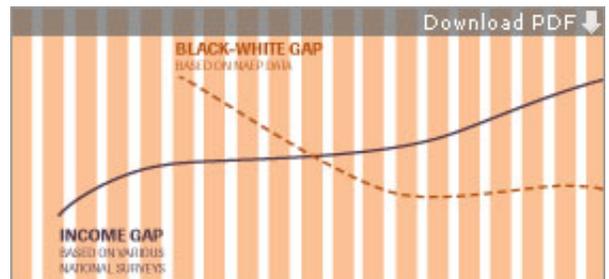
One group, known as the "**Broader, Bolder Approach to Education**," issued a manifesto calling for an expansive view of education policy that says schools alone can't erase the effects of poverty and should be treated as one part of a bigger strategy to address health, housing, parenting, and out-of-school time, among other issues, to improve outcomes for students.

A diverse group of scholars and educators, such as former Boston Superintendent Thomas W. Payzant, Stanford University scholar Linda Darling-Hammond, and then-Chicago schools chief Arne Duncan, signed the manifesto.

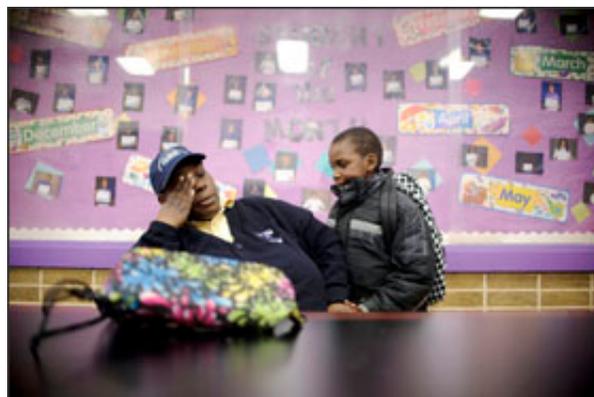
The other group, known as the **Education Equality Project** and often referred to as the "no excuses" camp, called for adopting measures that would dramatically change the teaching profession through performance pay, an end to tenure, and creation of more-rigorous evaluations that would hold teachers accountable for their students' performance. Ms. Rhee and former New York City Schools Chancellor Joel I. Klein—backed by civil rights leaders such as the Rev. Al Sharpton—were among the signatories.

Mr. Duncan also signed on to Education Equality's manifesto before being named U.S. secretary of education.

Andrés A. Alonso, the superintendent of schools in Baltimore since 2007, is often grouped with the no-excuses viewpoint for many of the changes he has brought to the struggling school system, such as closing schools and replacing low-performing principals and teachers. But he, like Mr. Duncan, endorsed both manifestos, and he credits efforts in Baltimore to increase preschool participation and address chronic



SOURCE: *Whither Opportunity? Rising Inequality, Schools, and Children's Life Chance*



Baltimore 1st grader Jahmal Harrison and his mother, Tameka Harrison, wait inside City Springs Elementary School for a bus to the homeless shelter where they live. Jahmal is not atypical in his school, where 96 percent of the students qualify for the federal subsidized-meal program. Recent research shows that as income inequality has grown, so too has the achievement gap between poor and rich children. —Matt Roth for Education Week

absenteeism as among "the most productive part of our work here."

"It's been so unproductive to somehow pit competing theories of what accounts for failures of schools," Mr. Alonso said. "To say that poverty doesn't matter is something that teachers and people in schools feel trivializes their reality. You potentially sacrifice credibility to not say that poverty matters at the same time that you must assert that [poverty] should not determine what schools do in response."

Ms. Rhee, now the founder and chief executive officer of StudentsFirst, a national education advocacy group based in Sacramento, Calif., agrees that educators can't ignore the circumstances students come from. She cites efforts she made during her three years as chancellor in Washington to provide "wraparound" services and supports to students, such as placing guidance counselors, parent coordinators, and mentors for troubled children in every school.

But those tactics do not rival the positive influence of a great teacher, she said.

"What often happens when we start to talk about wraparound services is a lot of people start to give up responsibility," Ms. Rhee said. "Even if you don't have wraparound services, the research shows that highly effective teachers can make a huge difference."

Closer Look at Income

When Mr. Reardon of Stanford set out to look at the relationship between rising income inequality and student achievement, he did not expect to see such a stark divide between rich and poor children, he said.

He examined standardized-test scores for reading and mathematics dating back to 1960 and ending in 2007 from several large national studies, such as the National Education Longitudinal Study. He then compared children from families in the 90th percentile of income—roughly \$160,000 in 2008—with those in the 10th percentile—around \$17,500 the same year—and found that over the past 30 years, the achievement gap between the two groups had grown by 40 percent.

"I was surprised by the magnitude," Mr. Reardon said. The growth in the income-based achievement gap also looked similar within racial groups, he said.

"A 90th percentile family makes 10 times the income now that a 10th percentile family does," Mr. Reardon said. "And the way these affluent parents raise their children has shifted dramatically. They believe their job as a parent is to organize their kids' lives around cognitive stimulation."

That's why making early-childhood education a bigger priority within efforts to improve public schooling makes sense, he said.

"Even if you do think schools can overcome most of this," Mr. Reardon said, "why would you want kids to go through the first six years of their lives under these circumstances and enter kindergarten with these huge disparities?"

Indeed, there is growing momentum nationally and at the state level for expanding and improving early-childhood-education programs, according to experts.

The federal Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge is



Students are not allowed inside City Springs' basketball court, where Principal Rhonda Richetta says she finds broken glass, used drug paraphernalia, and homeless people sleeping on benches.

providing \$500 million for nine states to share as they pursue —Matt Roth for Education Week efforts to increase the quality of early-childhood programs for low-income children, and stringent new rules for Head Start services are designed to increase the quality of the federally funded preschool program for poor children.

Wraparound Services

While most of the current policy initiatives at the federal and state levels still focus largely on accountability and raising standards for students and teachers, efforts that include tactics for improving the environments children live in—known as wraparound services— are expanding.

Some of them, like the Harlem Children's Zone in New York, through which families receive a broad array of free services in addition to their children's enrollment in a charter school, are not new. The decades-old "community schools" model, which brings nonprofit partners into schools to help educators address a range of issues stemming from poverty, is also inspiring more recent efforts.

Among the current initiatives:

- The U.S. Department of Education's "**Promise Neighborhoods**" has awarded this fiscal year more than \$20 million in grants to five communities to create schools that pair education with health and other services for families.
- A **five-year project** in McDowell County, W.Va., begun late last year and spearheaded by the American Federation of Teachers, seeks to simultaneously improve schooling and address problems brought about by the deep economic troubles in that area. It features partnerships with nonprofit groups, corporations, higher education, and government agencies to expand access to medical and dental services, improve drug-abuse-prevention and -treatment programs, and provide more opportunities for recreation and enrichment for children.
- An **effort** begun last summer by Oakland, Calif., schools Superintendent Tony Smith aims to make every city school a "community hub," where partners provide services to counteract poverty's effects. Goals include vaccinating children before kindergarten, eliminating disparities in how students of different races are disciplined, and boosting school attendance.

"More and more leaders are saying that it's their obligation and moral responsibility to help address these problems," said Martin J. Blank, the director of the Washington-based Coalition for Community Schools, "and that it's really at the core of their academic mission."

Richard D. Kahlenberg, a senior fellow at the Century Foundation in Washington, is a leading proponent of policies that seek to break up large concentrations of poverty in individual schools. He hopes the *Whither Opportunity?* volume of research on poverty and schooling will spur greater will to try solutions, such as new school assignment policies, that have proved politically difficult in the past.

Specifically, he favors efforts that seek to mix children from high-, middle-, and low-income families in schools. He cited results from the 4th grade math portion of the National Assessment of Educational

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Progress that showed poor children who attended more-affluent schools were "two years ahead of their peers in high-poverty schools."

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