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Class Matters. Why Won't We Admit It?

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NO one seriously disputes the fact that students from disadvantaged households perform less well in school, on average, than their peers from more advantaged backgrounds. But rather than confront this fact of life head-on, our policy makers mistakenly continue to reason that, since they cannot change the backgrounds of students, they should focus on things they can control.

[No Child Left Behind](#), President George W. Bush's signature education law, did this by setting unrealistically high — and ultimately self-defeating — expectations for all schools. President Obama's policies have concentrated on trying to make schools more "efficient" through means like judging teachers by their students' test scores or encouraging competition by promoting the creation of [charter schools](#). The proverbial story of the drunk looking for his keys under the lamppost comes to mind.

The Occupy movement has catalyzed rising anxiety over income inequality; we desperately need a similar reminder of the relationship between economic advantage and student performance.

The correlation has been abundantly documented, notably by the famous Coleman Report in 1966. New research by Sean F. Reardon of Stanford University traces the achievement gap between children from high- and low-income families over the last 50 years and finds that it now far exceeds the gap between white and black students.

Data from the [National Assessment of Educational Progress](#) show that more than 40 percent of the variation in average reading scores and 46 percent of the variation in average math scores across states is associated with variation in child poverty rates.

International research tells the same story. Results of the 2009 reading tests conducted by the Program for International Student Assessment show that, among 15-year-olds in the United States and the 13 countries whose students outperformed ours, students with lower economic and social

status had far lower test scores than their more advantaged counterparts within every country. Can anyone credibly believe that the mediocre overall performance of American students on international tests is unrelated to the fact that one-fifth of American children live in poverty?

Yet federal education policy seems blind to all this. No Child Left Behind required all schools to bring all students to high levels of achievement but took no note of the challenges that disadvantaged students face. The legislation did, to be sure, specify that subgroups — defined by income, minority status and proficiency in English — must meet the same achievement standard. But it did so only to make sure that schools did not ignore their disadvantaged students — not to help them address the challenges they carry with them into the classroom.

So why do presumably well-intentioned policy makers ignore, or deny, the correlations of family background and student achievement?

Some honestly believe that schools are capable of offsetting the effects of poverty. Others want to avoid the impression that they set lower expectations for some groups of students for fear that those expectations will be self-fulfilling. In both cases, simply wanting something to be true does not make it so.

Another rationale for denial is to note that some schools, like the Knowledge Is Power Program charter schools, have managed to “beat the odds.” If some schools can succeed, the argument goes, then it is reasonable to expect all schools to. But close scrutiny of charter school performance has shown that many of the success stories have been limited to particular grades or subjects and may be attributable to substantial outside financing or extraordinarily long working hours on the part of teachers. The evidence does not support the view that the few success stories can be scaled up to address the needs of large populations of disadvantaged students.

A final rationale for denying the correlation is more nefarious. As we are now seeing, requiring all schools to meet the same high standards for all students, regardless of family background, will inevitably lead either to large numbers of failing schools or to a dramatic lowering of state standards. Both serve to discredit the public education system and lend support to arguments that the system is failing and needs fundamental change, like privatization.

Given the budget crises at the national and state levels, and the strong political power of conservative groups, a significant effort to reduce poverty or deal with the closely related issue of racial segregation is not in the political cards, at least for now.

So what can be done?

Large bodies of research have shown how poor health and nutrition inhibit child development and learning and, conversely, how high-quality early childhood and preschool education programs can enhance them. We understand the importance of early exposure to rich language on future cognitive development. We know that low-income students experience greater learning loss during the summer when their more privileged peers are enjoying travel and other enriching activities.

Since they can't take on poverty itself, education policy makers should try to provide poor students with the social support and experiences that middle-class students enjoy as a matter of course.

It can be done. In North Carolina, the two-year-old East Durham Children's Initiative is one of many efforts around the country to replicate Geoffrey Canada's well-known successes with the Harlem Children's Zone.

Say Yes to Education in Syracuse, N.Y., supports access to afterschool programs and summer camps and places social workers in schools. In Omaha, Building Bright Futures sponsors school-based health centers and offers mentoring and enrichment services. Citizen Schools, based in Boston, recruits volunteers in seven states to share their interests and skills with middle-school students.

Promise Neighborhoods, an Obama administration effort that gives grants to programs like these, is a welcome first step, but it has been under-financed.

Other countries already pursue such strategies. In Finland, with its famously high-performing schools, schools provide food and free health care for students. Developmental needs are addressed early. Counseling services are abundant.

But in the United States over the past decade, it became fashionable among supporters of the "no excuses" approach to school improvement to accuse anyone raising the poverty issue of letting schools off the hook — or what Mr. Bush famously called "the soft bigotry of low expectations."

Such accusations may afford the illusion of a moral high ground, but they stand in the way of serious efforts to improve education and, for that matter, go a long way toward explaining why No Child Left Behind has not worked.

Yes, we need to make sure that all children, and particularly disadvantaged children, have access to good schools, as defined by the quality of teachers and principals and of internal policies and practices.

But let's not pretend that family background does not matter and can be overlooked. Let's agree that we know a lot about how to address the ways in which poverty undermines student learning. Whether we choose to face up to that reality is ultimately a moral question.

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