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The real cause of the urban school problem

October 06, 2011 | By Greg J. Duncan and Richard J. Murnane

America's urban public [schools](#) are in trouble: Student test scores are low and dropout rates are high. Recent remedies proposed include everything from reducing the power of teachers unions and opening more charter schools to ending test-based accountability. But what if education critics are focused on the wrong problem?

Implicit in these very different proposals is the assumption that urban schools are failing because they are run badly, and that the solution lies in improving their management. Over the last five years, we have been involved in a wide-ranging research project that provides compelling evidence to the contrary. Our findings show that the root of the problems facing urban schools can be found in gradual but extremely powerful changes in the nation's economy — not the least of which is the increasingly unequal distribution of family incomes. Policies that address the consequences of these changes, which recent poverty figures show have worsened, are more likely to improve the life chances of the children from low-income families.

For the first three-quarters of the 20th century, [economic](#) growth, fueled in large part by the increasing educational attainments of successive generations of Americans, was a rising tide that lifted the boats of the rich and poor alike. During the most recent three decades, by contrast, the fruits of economic growth have not been widely shared and the gap between the incomes of the nation's rich and poor families has grown enormously.

Little noticed, but vital for our nation's future prosperity, is the equally dramatic widening of the gap between the educational attainments of children growing up in rich and poor families. Between 1978 and 2008, the gap between the average mathematics and reading [test scores](#) of children from high- and low-income families grew by a third. This growing test score gap has been reflected in a growing gap in completed schooling. Over the last 20 years, the rate of affluent children who completed college increased by 21 percentage points, while the graduation rate of children from low-income families increased by only 4 percentage points.

Growing economic inequality contributes in a multitude of ways to a widening gulf between the educational outcomes of rich and poor children. In the early 1970s, the gap between what parents in the top and bottom quintiles spent on enrichment activities such as music lessons, [travel](#) and summer camps was approximately \$2,700 per year (in 2008 dollars). By 2005-2006, the difference had increased to \$7,500. Between birth and age 6, children from high-income families spend an average of 1,300 more hours than children from low-income families in "novel" places — other than at home or school, or in the care of another parent or a day care facility. This matters, because when children are asked to read science and social studies texts in the upper elementary school grades, background knowledge is critical to comprehension and academic success.

Historically, we have relied on our public schools to level the playing field for children born into different circumstances, but in recent years, the gaps in achievement and behavior between high- and low-income children have only grown wider. Why? For one thing, residential segregation by income has meant that poor children are concentrated in the same schools to a much greater extent today than 40 years ago. As a result, children from low-income families are far more likely to have classmates with low achievement and behavior problems, which have a negative effect on their own learning. Children from poor families are also especially likely to attend schools with high rates of student turnover during the [school](#) year, and there is clear evidence that students learn less under such circumstances. In Chicago's public schools, 10 percent of students change school every year and it is not uncommon for some classrooms to have five new students arrive during the year. Research shows that students learn less if they attend schools with high student turnover during the school year.

Teacher quality contributes to the weak academic performance of low-income students as well. Schools serving high concentrations of poor, nonwhite and low-achieving students find it difficult to attract and retain skilled teachers. When teachers leave after only a short period of time, there is little

payoff to investments in improving their skills, and it is difficult to coordinate instruction among teachers, a feature that characterizes effective schools.

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