

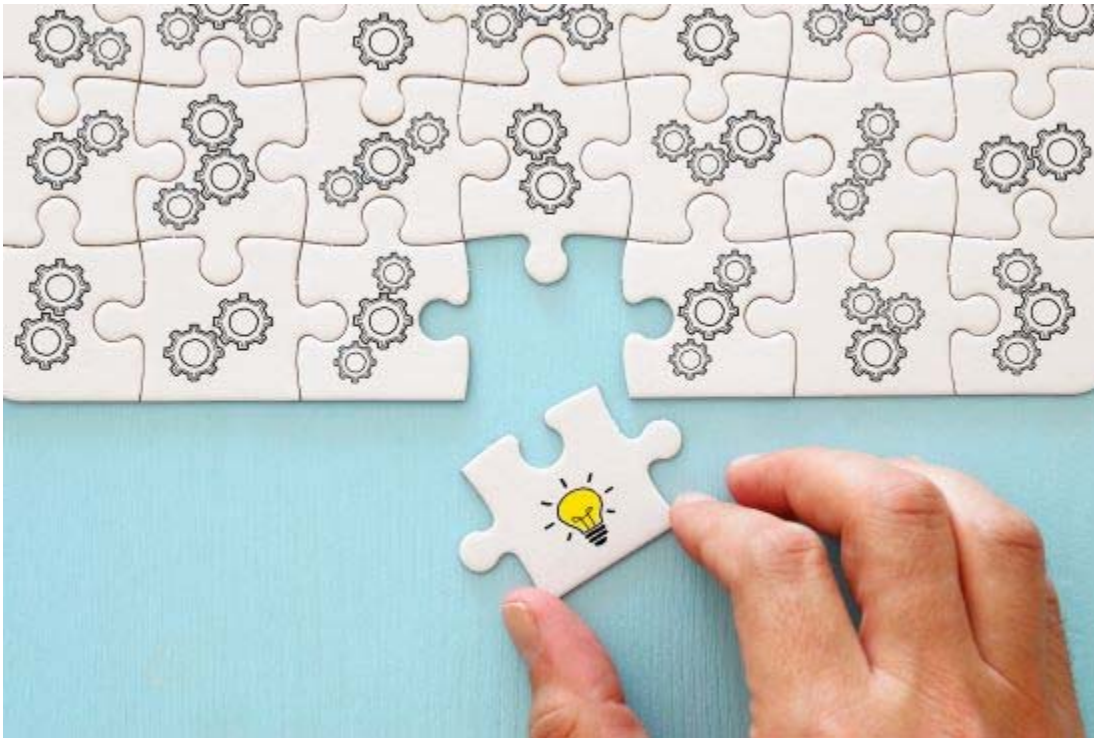
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Possible futures: The policy changes we need to get there - kappanonline.org

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22-28 minutes

To take advantage of this moment, we need to undo many of the policies that prop up our existing model of schooling and replace them with ones that promote changes to our curricular designs, learning communities, high-quality assessments, community partnerships, and teaching practices.

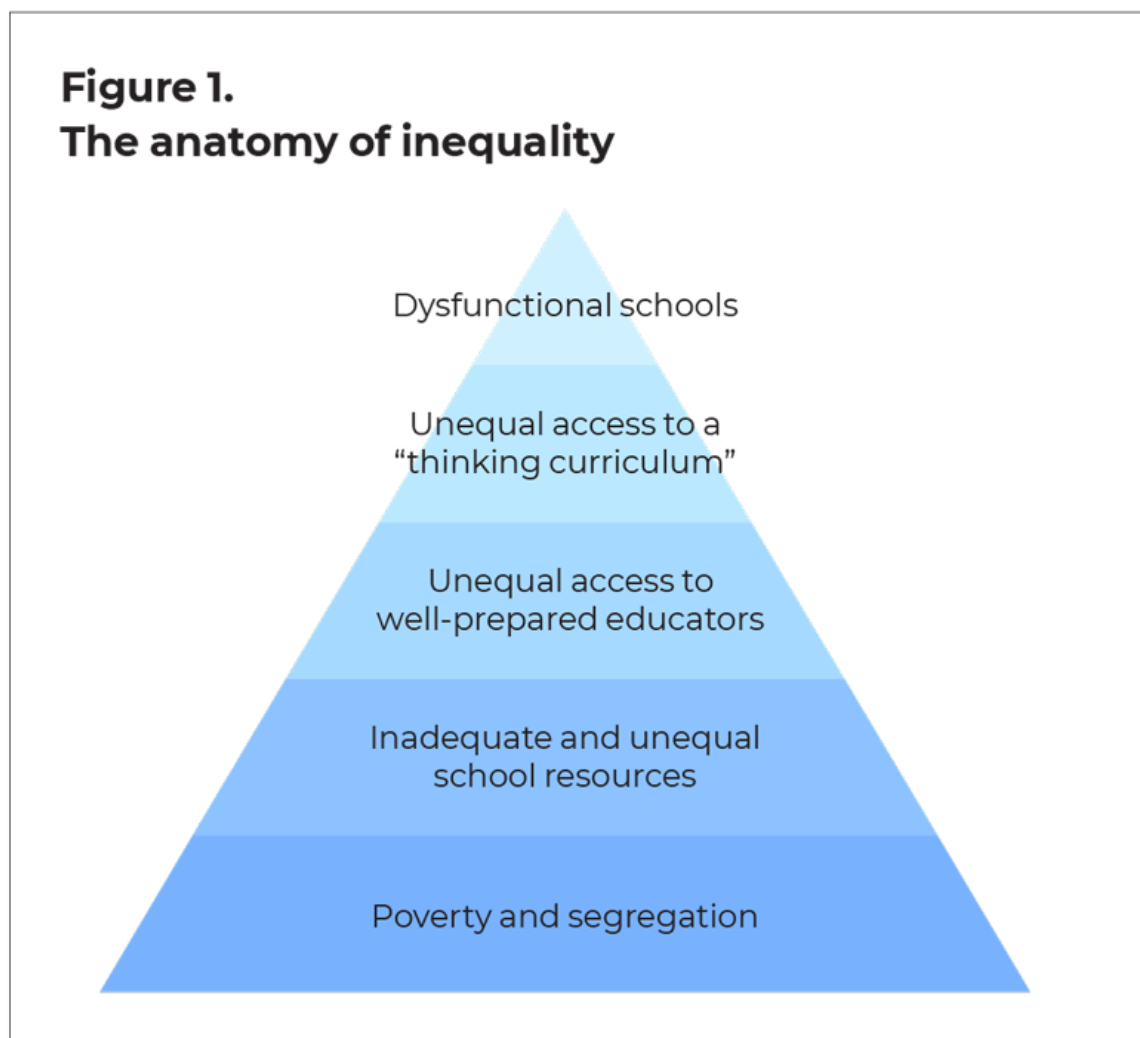


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The rich commentaries in this series describe many ways in which public schooling in the United States must change if it is to fulfill the promise of a quality education for each and every child. But it will do no good to exhort educators to change their beliefs and practices so long as their schools are constrained by the factory-model designs of a century ago, rooted in layers of laws and regulations that hold them in place. To create better and more equitable schools for the future, and to do so at scale, we will also need to change the many *policies* that keep public education tied to its past and prevent educators from solving the pressing problems we face.

The anatomy of inequality in the United States begins with the highest rates of child poverty in the industrialized world: More than one in five children lives in a family whose income is below the federal poverty line, and 7% live in deep poverty on household incomes of less than \$14,000 a year for a family of four. These families — disproportionately Black, Latinx, Pacific Islander, and Native American — experience high and growing rates of homelessness and food insecurity. They are increasingly segregated by race and class in redlined communities where jobs and services are scarce, and where hazards ranging from regular violence to toxic waste sites pose significant health and learning barriers for children and families (Darling-Hammond & Darling-Hammond, in press). In most states, schools in such low-income neighborhoods tend to be inadequately and inequitably

funded, despite the more extensive supports their students need.



Further, those schools tend to be chronically short of educators who know how to provide developmentally appropriate, culturally responsive instruction that supports deeper learning. While some educators have the good fortune (and resources) to attend preparation programs that enable them to teach diverse learners for deeper learning (Darling-Hammond & Oakes et al., 2019), many receive little to no such preparation — and those with the least preparation are disproportionately hired to work in low-income communities (serving students of color and English learners), where they tend to be less well paid, have larger classes, and have fewer educational resources of every kind. Given these circumstances, many of these teachers leave within a few years, which further depresses student achievement and triggers ongoing teacher shortages. Moreover, our schools have far too few teachers of color, whose presence in the classroom is particularly important for the success of Black and Brown students (Carver-Thomas, 2018).

These challenges took shape almost exactly a century ago, when so-called “scientific managers” were designing the modern system to respond to fast-growing enrollments in urban schools, fueled by immigration, migration, and the emergence of compulsory education. The goal was to prepare most students for manual labor in factories and other industries, at a time when the American workplace was being revolutionized by assembly-line technologies and new models of bureaucracy.

In that era, few students were expected to develop the higher-order skills required by managers or professionals who were supposed to think on the job. Everybody else was supposed to be tracked, efficiently, into their correct “place in life,” a determination informed by the deeply held racial, ethnic, and cultural prejudices of the day, which, for many prominent school reformers, included eugenicist theories about differential intelligence. In 1909, for instance, Stanford University education school dean Ellwood P. Cubberley described newly arriving southern and eastern Europeans as:

a very different type from the north Europeans who preceded them. Illiterate, docile, lacking in self-reliance and initiative, and not possessing the Anglo-Teutonic conceptions of law, order, and government Our city schools will soon be forced to give up the exceedingly democratic idea that all are equal . . . and to begin a specialization of educational effort.

Psychologist and IQ test developer Lewis Terman, also a professor at Stanford, found that 80% of the immigrants he tested appeared to be “feeble-minded,” and he further concluded in *Intelligence Tests and School Reorganization* that “Indians, Mexicans, and negroes . . . should be segregated in special classes. . . . They cannot master abstractions, but they can often be made efficient workers” (Terman et al., 1922).

Similarly, school administrator W.B. Pillsbury (1921) explained that school systems should become a means for “selecting the men of best intelligence from the deficient and mediocre.” He noted: “The incapable are soon rejected or drop out. . . and pass into the ranks of unskilled labor, [while] the more intelligent who are to be clerical workers pass into the high school.” Only “the most intelligent enter the universities whence they are selected for the professions” (p. 71).

In short, the belief that only some students are worthy of investment — and that students need to be ranked and sorted according to their potential — is deeply rooted in the organizational design of our schools, our funding priorities, our testing and grading policies, and our systems for tracking and labeling students (into, for example, gifted programs, remedial classes, special education categories, and test rankings indicating whether they perform “above” or “below” the norm).

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Our modern school systems were designed not just to sort students, however, but also to maximize rote learning and rule-following and minimize the cultivation of personal interests and relationships. As Max Weber (1921/1968) noted of the early 20th century’s new form of organization: “Bureaucracy develops more perfectly the more it is dehumanized” (p. 973).

To achieve efficiencies and minimize personal relationships, the U.S. adopted the Prussian age-grading system and the “platoon system” for moving children along, as if on a conveyer belt, from one teacher to the next, grade to grade, and class period to class period, to be stamped with the prescribed lessons before they pass on to the next. In this system, most children have little opportunity to become well known as individuals or as members of families and communities. Even in the elementary years, teachers can only *begin* to learn about students’ individual strengths and needs before they have to pass them along to the next grade. And in the secondary years, teachers may see as many as 150-200 students every day, which makes it difficult to know and care for all of their students well.

Nor is it easy for teachers to work with one another. In this assembly-line system, U.S. teachers teach more hours per week and year than those in any other country (about eight hours per week more, on average), working in eggcrate classrooms that isolate them from one another, with little time to plan together or share their knowledge (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2014).

The large urban schools that most low-income students of color attend are often run like huge warehouses, housing 2,000 or more students in a facility focused more on controlling behavior than on developing community. With a locker as their only stable point of contact, young people cycle through as many as six to eight classes per day. Rarely do they get to see a school counselor, who must try to meet the “personal needs” of hundreds of students at once. Most students experience such high schools as uncaring, even adversarial environments where “getting over” becomes the priority and “getting known” is impossible. Indeed, in a large national survey, fewer than 30% of middle and high school students said their school was a caring environment (Durlak et al., 2011). A California high school student put it succinctly: “This place hurts my spirit” (Poplin & Weeres, 1992, p. 11). An administrator in the same school voiced the poignant dilemma of caring educators caught in the squeeze between mandates and children: “Yes, my spirit is hurt, too, when I have to do things I don’t believe in” (p. 23).

Educators and policy makers have sought to reform this model countless times in the last century. Some have tried to *perfect* it: At the turn of the 21st century, for instance, the federal government required states to adopt high-stakes annual standardized testing as the lever for change. Though intended to drive more equitable

outcomes, the tests were not accompanied by greater resources, and their focus on low-level multiple-choice questions reduced attention to higher-order thinking skills, often leading to a prescriptive curriculum that required teachers to ignore children's needs and modes of learning.

Others have tried to *subvert* the model: Many courageous educators have created innovative school designs that provide robust intellectual and developmental supports that enable transformative outcomes for students. Some of these now operate in networks that spread these practices, including Big Picture Learning, Envision Learning, Expeditionary Learning, Internationals Network, Linked Learning Academies, New Tech Network, and many more. These efforts, however, have lived at the margins of the largely unchanged system we've experienced since the early 20th century.

Today, though, we find ourselves in a moment when it may, in fact, be possible to *reinvent* our system of education. As the other authors in this series have argued, we have recently made major scientific advancements in our understanding of human development and learning; as a nation, we've reached at least a rhetorical consensus that our societal health requires us to provide *all* of our students with the sort of "thinking curriculum" we long reserved for a small elite — and accomplishing this will require a greater commitment to equitable education than ever before.

The emerging sciences of learning and development make it clear that a culturally grounded, whole child approach to education — which begins with an inclusive school climate that affirms and supports all students — is essential to academic achievement and healthy development.

To take advantage of this moment, we need to undo many of the policies that prop up the existing model and replace them with ones that encourage us to enact the kinds of curricular designs, learning communities, high-quality assessments, community partnerships, and teaching practices that my fellow contributors to this series have described. In brief, this means we must help policy makers to:

1) Establish school conditions that enable all children to thrive.

Policies guide how schools and the professionals within them can access and use funding, create learning systems, support students' needs, and engage in improvement. To ensure developmentally healthy school environments, policy makers should:

- *Provide **adequate and equitable funding** based on pupil needs* to every district and school to support a stable, diverse, well-prepared staff; provide programmatic and curriculum resources; and ensure that all children have what they need to learn effectively. States that have pursued this path, including Massachusetts and New Jersey, are now the highest-performing in the nation and have reduced opportunity and achievement gaps (Darling-Hammond, 2019).
- *Create **community schools*** that organize whole child supports promoting students' physical and mental health, social welfare, and academic success and ensure regular and authentic family engagement. All adults should focus their work around a shared conception of whole child development within a multitiered system of support, beginning with universal designs for learning and social-emotional supports in every classroom and extending through more intensive, personalized academic and nonacademic assistance provided to students when they need it, without labeling or delays. Well-implemented community school initiatives support improved attendance, achievement, and attainment (Maier et al., 2017) and have created lifelines for children and families during the pandemic.
- *Ensure that all children have access to **high-quality preschool*** that offers a deeper learning curriculum from an early age, when children are developing their initial brain architecture as they explore, inquire, communicate, and play (Immordino-Yang, Darling-Hammond, & Krone, 2019). Children are innately curious and engaged in problem solving, through which they acquire knowledge and put it to use. High-quality preschools cultivate these abilities, along with social-emotional skills, so that they transfer into learning throughout later schooling and life. Investment in quality preschool benefits long-term academic achievement and attainment, as well as life success (Heckman & Masterov, 2007).
- *Design **supportive accountability and continuous improvement systems*** that focus on students' opportunities to learn. Such systems should emphasize indicators of students' access to educational resources: well-qualified educators; a rich curriculum; high-quality teaching and instructional materials (including digital access); a positive school climate; social-emotional and academic supports; and expert instruction for English learners,

students with disabilities, and other students with particular needs. They would also include indicators of learning and progress using rich performance-based assessments that measure learning in authentic ways, completion of well-designed pathways to college and careers, and accomplishments such as biliteracy and civic engagement (Darling-Hammond et al., 2016).

- **Foster *integration and intergroup understanding*** by supporting strategies that enable greater diversity, such as integrative school district boundaries and assignment policies and incentives for magnet schools, as well as curricula that support cultural inclusion and understanding and promote belonging and identity development that foster achievement, as well as positive relations among and within groups (George & Darling-Hammond, 2019).

2) Design schools for healthy development and learning

Within a productive policy environment, schools can more effectively support students if they are designed to foster strong relationships and provide a holistic approach to student support and family engagement. To create such settings, educators and policy makers can:

- **Design *relationship-centered schools*** in which students can be well-known and supported, by creating small schools or learning communities within schools, looping teachers with students for more than one year, creating advisory systems, supporting teaching teams, and organizing schools with longer grade spans — all of which have been found to strengthen relationships and improve student attendance, achievement, and attainment.
- Replace zero-tolerance discipline policies with ***restorative practices*** focused on strategies that enable students to develop empathy, problem solving, and conflict resolution skills, so they can take responsibility for themselves and their community. Develop state and federal policies that offer appropriate guidance and professional learning supports, as well as district- and school-wide norms that establish shared practices that support physical and psychological safety while reducing bullying, conflict, and exclusionary discipline (Fronius et al., 2019).
- **Design *curriculum, assessment, and instruction for deeper learning*** that builds on prior knowledge and experience; integrates students' cultural and linguistic funds of knowledge; supports collaboration and inquiry interwoven with direct instruction; provides opportunities for authentic, formative assessment that informs reflection and revision of work; and fosters metacognitive and strategic learning that supports student agency, independence, resourcefulness, and resilience.
- Provide ***extended learning*** time to ensure that students do not fall behind, including skillful tutoring that can replace tracking with targeted academic support and additional support for homework, mentoring, and enrichment.
- **Prioritize and fund *family engagement*** as part of the core approach to education, including home visits and flexibly scheduled student-teacher-parent conferences in which teachers learn from parents about their children; outreach to involve families in school activities; and regular communication through positive phone calls, emails, and text messages.

3) Prepare and enable educators to provide both academic and developmental support

Educators need to learn how to redesign schools and develop practices that support a positive school climate and healthy, whole child development. To accomplish this, federal, state, and local preparation programs can:

- **Redesign *licensing and accreditation requirements*** for teachers and administrators to incorporate educator competencies regarding how to teach for deeper learning and for equity; culturally responsive and culturally competent practices; students' social, emotional, and cognitive development; and restorative practices.
- **Design and resource *preservice preparation programs*** for both teachers and administrators that provide a strong foundation in child and adolescent development and learning; knowledge of how to create engaging and effective instruction; skills for implementing social-emotional learning and restorative justice programs; and an understanding of how to work with families and community organizations to create a shared developmentally supportive approach. These should include year-long, well-supervised clinical experiences in equity-oriented partner schools that are good models of developmentally supportive practices and that create a positive school climate for all students.

- Offer widely available **professional learning opportunities** that help educators continually build on and refine student-centered teaching and learning practices focused on deeper learning; use data about school climate and a wide range of student outcomes to undertake continuous improvement; problem solve around the needs of individual children; engage in schoolwide initiatives in collegial teams and professional learning communities; and learn from other schools through networks, site visits, and documentation of successes. This requires changes to staffing and scheduling designs so that teachers have dedicated time for collaborative planning and learning.
- Invest in educator **recruitment and retention**, including forgivable loans and service scholarships that support strong preparation; high-retention pathways into the profession — such as residencies — that diversify the educator workforce; high-quality mentoring for beginners; and collegial environments for practice. Educator wellness investments are also key, including reasonable workloads, access to tools like mindfulness, and social-emotional learning approaches that benefit both adults and children. A strong, stable, diverse, well-prepared teaching and leadership workforce is perhaps the most important ingredient for a positive school climate that supports effective whole child education.

The emerging sciences of learning and development make it clear that a culturally grounded, whole child approach to education — which begins with an inclusive school climate that affirms and supports all students — is essential to academic achievement and healthy development. The challenge ahead is to assemble the whole village — policy makers, educators, health care providers, youth developers, philanthropists, and families — to work together to change policies and practices to ensure that all young people receive the benefit of what we know about how to support their healthy path to a productive future.

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