

Addressing the Opportunity Gap: A Smarter Approach to Low-Income Education

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Betsy DeVos' nomination and subsequent confirmation as Secretary of Education in early 2017 reinvigorated the conversation surrounding public education in the United States. Her support of school-choice policies and lack of experience in public schools caused uproar not only among politicians and education professionals, but from the general public as people became increasingly aware of her proposed solutions to problems within the education system. Unlike most Secretary of Education nominees of the past, DeVos has become the subject of protests, comedy sketches, and extensive news coverage; whatever her deficiencies as a candidate, her confirmation has stirred the public's recognition of the issues within the education system and desire to find solutions.¹ Many studies have comprehensively shown that American schools are underperforming when compared with other developed countries, and that metrics like graduation rate and test scores in America are rising much more slowly than they are abroad.² For many, the fear that other nations are producing more educated citizens has added urgency to the issues of education in this country. The conclusion that most people have reached, regardless of their political views or understanding of the issue, is that our nation's education system must be fixed, and must be fixed quickly. However, everyone who approaches the issue sees different problems within the system, as well as different ways of addressing those problems.

¹ Emmarie Huetteman and Yamiche Alcindor, "Betsy DeVos Confirmed as Education Secretary; Pence Breaks Tie," *The New York Times* (New York, NY), Feb. 7, 2017.

² Drew DeSilver, "U.S. Students' Academic Achievement Still Lags That of Their Peers in Many Other Countries," Pew Research Center (Feb. 15, 2017).

One of the biggest of such issues now in the public eye is the performance of low-income students, who often achieve less than their wealthier peers as measured by metrics like standardized test scores and dropout rates. This income-based equity gap expands well beyond the realm of education, as it plays a key role in perpetuating cycles of poverty nationwide. Less than 40% of students in from families in the bottom 20% of incomes enroll in college, and fewer than 10% of these students graduate.³ Because of the immense value of a college education, these low-income students will earn far less on average than their better-educated peers, perpetuating existing socioeconomic inequality.⁴ However, although statistics on higher education are easily available and often cited to explain national trends that keep poor children in poverty, the root of such cycles is not at the collegiate level but in primary and secondary education, as low-income students leave elementary, middle, and high school less prepared than middle-class and wealthy students for applying to and attending college.

There are a number of factors such as race and geography complicating the issue of low-income education and making practical and effective solutions hard to identify. The most common response to the problems faced by low-income students is simply to hope that by increasing funding to schools serving low-income populations, poorly-performing schools will improve. However, simply allocating more funding for low-income education will not solve the problem alone. These funds must be focused towards community-based initiatives within low-income districts, and other groups such as wealthy communities and politicians must support these initiatives in order to truly affect change.

³ Gregor Aisch, Larry Buchanan, Amanda Cox and Kevin Quealy, "Some Colleges Have More Students From the Top 1 Percent Than the Bottom 60. Find Yours," *The New York Times*, (New York, NY): Jan. 18, 2017.

⁴ Mikhail Zinshteyn, "The Growing College-Degree Wealth Gap," *The Atlantic* (Apr. 29, 2016).

There have been many types of proposed and attempted solutions regarding the problem of low-income education. However, some of the most common solutions, including both concentration and deconcentration policies, have major shortcomings which not only waste money but often hide the challenges that low-income students face. By contrast, community-based programs have been more successful, yet are difficult to enact. In order to provide positive change in low-income students' educational opportunities and wellbeing, funding for low-income schools must be directed towards community programs, and must be sufficient to make such programs successful. In this essay, I discuss the issues with both school segregation and desegregation, explain why these problematic policies are still the most common approaches to addressing the equity gap, and present community-oriented solutions as a more effective alternative.

a. Concentration Policies

One of the most common approaches to improving low-income education is concentration, or segregation, of low-income students into homogeneous schools based on race and income.⁵ These initiatives often involve gerrymandering school districts to group students by their communities rather than their geographic location—when segregated neighborhoods are near to one another, the divisions that form between communities are often grounded more strongly in race and income than geography. Concentrated schools are often seen as an ideal way to help low-income students because such schools can be singular, focused targets into which the

⁵ See visualization, “Segregated Elementary Schools, Desegregated High School: The Conditions of Education for Students from East Palo Alto,” at jujukan.com/education

government (whether state or federal) can provide funding.⁶ Typically promoted by members of higher-income communities, concentration policies are problematic because they often trap low-income students in exceptionally underfunded and low-performing schools in favor of the benefits to wealthier students.

Schools created through concentration policies rarely receive adequate funding because they serve areas with low property taxes and thus rely on the state for all of their resources. Most people believe that Title I, which provides federal funding for low-income schools, works most effectively when schools are highly concentrated with low-income students—if low-income students are concentrated, the government can provide more funds to fewer schools, and the more concentrated such schools are, the greater the likelihood that this additional funding is used to help poor students as opposed to their wealthier classmates. However, in the vast majority of cases, complying with Title I regulations has become a shell game, leaving the most concentrated schools with the fewest resources. States and local areas commonly withhold funds from low-income schools and instead divert money to wealthier schools with the knowledge that the low-income schools will receive funding due to Title I. As a result, low-income schools see no change in funding, while wealthier schools, previously funded mostly by property taxes, receive a funding increase from the state.

This imbalance is exacerbated because concentrated low-income schools often require additional funding in order to provide services unnecessary in wealthier schools, such as food assistance and English-language classes for both students and families. Additionally, better-funded wealthier schools can afford to pay teachers higher salaries, leaving low-income

⁶ United States Government Accountability Office, “Better Use of Information Could Help Agencies Identify Disparities and Address Racial Discrimination,” (Washington, DC): Apr. 2016.

districts with inexperienced teachers and the need for expensive training programs. Laurel School and Willow Oaks School, two elementary schools in Menlo Park, provide an example of the effects of school segregation. Located only blocks from each other, the two schools serve strikingly different demographic populations⁷—fewer than 10% of Laurel School students qualify for free or reduced lunch compared to almost 90% of Willow Oaks students on the program—a difference reflected in the schools’ budgets.⁸ Not only does Laurel School spend more per student, but the Willow Oaks budget includes a number of expenditures not necessary at Laurel School.⁹ Willow Oaks spends over 30% of its funding on English programs to help the 60% of its students still learning the language, whereas Laurel School does not have any such programs due to the lack of need for them.¹⁰ As a result, Willow Oaks’ “School Goals” such as parental engagement, as well as enrichment programs such as music and arts, are drastically underfunded relative to the same programs at Laurel School.¹¹

The result of this funding imbalance between concentrated low-income schools and their wealthier counterparts is an opportunity gap which perpetuates cycles of low achievement among poor students.¹² Highly-segregated schools repeatedly perform worse than mixed schools across all metrics, such as graduation rate and standardized test scores; mixed-race and mixed-income schools yield 25% higher test scores than segregated schools with the same average poverty level.¹³ Not only do high-poverty schools yield lower test scores, but the rate of improvement in

⁷ See visualization.

⁸ Menlo Park City School District, *Expenses* (2018).

⁹ Ravenswood School District, “Elementary and Secondary Education Act: Local Educational Agency Plan Goal 2 – Ravenswood City School District Budget Update,” *California Department of Education*, (East Palo Alto, CA): 2016.

¹⁰ Data Reporting Office, “Student Poverty FRPM Data,” *California Department of Education*, (Sacramento, CA): Oct. 2017.

¹¹ Barbara Wood, “Narrowing education equity gap in local schools,” *Palo Alto Online*, Aug. 17, 2016.

¹² Institute of Education Sciences, “The Condition of Education,” *National Center for Education Statistics*, (Washington, DC): 2010.

¹³ John R. Logan, Elisabeta Minca, and Sinem Adar, “The Geography of Inequality: Why Separate Means Unequal in American Public Schools.” *Sociology of Education* 85, no. 3 (2012): 287-301.

high-poverty schools is much slower than that of wealthier schools, exacerbating the achievement gap over time. For example, students in the concentrated, low-income Ravenswood School District (home to Willow Oaks School) begin third grade scoring 1.9 years below average but finish eighth grade scoring 2.4 years below average.¹⁴ By contrast, students in the wealthier Menlo Park City School District (home to Laurel School) begin third grade two years above average and finish eighth grade scoring 2.8 years above average. It is clear that such measures are ineffective in reducing the achievement gap, and governments must stop pouring money into implementing school segregation.

Despite this demonstrated inefficacy, wealthy communities overwhelmingly support school segregation policies because such policies keep low-income minority students out of their neighborhood schools. Milwaukee public schools are some of the most segregated in the nation by both race and income due to the extreme geographic segregation in the city along both of these lines, and attitudes towards this school segregation differ drastically by race and income. Although African American parents and low income parents overwhelmingly believe that homogeneous “neighborhood schools” are problematic, most wealthier white parents believe the opposite, a difference reflected in the city’s voting records.¹⁵ The support for segregated schools is so strong in some communities around the United States that certain cities have seceded from school districts to form their own school systems. Gardendale, Alabama is an often-cited example of such a city—a predominantly-white, low-poverty city located the majority-minority, low-income Jefferson County School District, Gardendale residents voted to secede from the district and form their own in the hope that new, restricted schools would represent the “values of

¹⁴ Emily Badger and Kevin Quealy, “How Effective Is Your School District? A New Measure Shows Where Students Learn the Most,” *The New York Times*, (New York, NY): Dec. 5, 2017.

¹⁵ Milwaukee Public Schools, “Public Education in Milwaukee: A Survey of Public Opinion,” *Public Policy Forum*, 2006.

their white community.”¹⁶ Although the secession was later overturned in a higher court, cities in fourteen states have successfully seceded from their districts, and there are secession efforts in progress in nine more.¹⁷

b. Deconcentration Policies

A common alternative to segregatory policies is the deconcentration, or desegregation, of low-income students into more diverse schools. Desegregation policies aim to break up large, poorly-performing schools which serve low-income populations while providing low-income children access to the resources and opportunities available in wealthier schools. These policies operate on different levels—some programs allow a small subset of low-income students to transfer to better schools outside of their district, whereas others distribute all of the students in a low-income district into different schools in the area. Although deconcentration policies provide benefits on the surface by eliminating poorly-performing schools, the academic results of low-income students in deconcentrated schools do not always improve, and sometimes even worsen as a result of the change. Because these harms are disguised by improvements in the school system overall, the government spends lots of money on such programs without any benefit to low-income students.

Low-income students consistently have worse test scores than their wealthier counterparts in mixed schools. Woodside High School is a magnet school¹⁸ which originally

¹⁶ Nikole Hannah-Jones, “The Resegregation of Jefferson County,” *The New York Times*, (New York, NY): Sep. 6, 2017.

¹⁷ “Fractured: The Breakdown of America’s School Districts,” *EdBuild* (2018).

¹⁸ Destination magnet schools are the result of a particular deconcentration policy—such schools often serve grades 9-12, provide specialized instruction in specific fields of study, and are designed to serve a more diverse population by drawing students from many areas within a district or even across district lines.

served a wealthier, predominantly-white student body, but since 2014 has both incorporated a poorer district and become a destination for low-income students who are bused from low-income areas such as the Ravenswood School District.^{19,20} Woodside now serves a majority-Hispanic population, and the test scores for low-income students are 30% lower than those of non-low-income students.²¹ This trend is consistent across many of such deconcentrated schools, as destination magnet schools such as Woodside not only show no improvement in overall performance but yield particularly poor results for low-income students.²² However, because the creation of destination magnet schools usually involves the dissolution of underperforming low-income schools, scores of the school districts overall improve despite no measurable increase in student performance.

There are many possible reasons for this disparity in scores between low-income students and wealthier students in heterogeneous schools. One of such reasons is the gap in high school preparation between these groups. Because the low-income students attended poorly-performing schools, such as those in the Ravenswood district, for middle school, they enter magnet high schools at a disadvantage and are placed in remedial programs which focus primarily on bringing them up to Common Core standards in reading and math. As a result, the enrichment programs and difficult classes available to the wealthier students at desegregated schools do not reach the low-income students, and the promise of middle-class opportunities in those schools goes unfulfilled. Another possible reason for the score disparity is the social harm that often arises from bringing unwanted minorities into predominantly-white schools and neighborhoods. School

¹⁹ See visualization.

²⁰ Dave Boyce, "Student enrollment at Woodside High not growing as predicted," *The Almanac* (Feb. 2, 2016).

²¹ Woodside High School, "School Accountability Report Card," *School Wise Press*, (2012).

²² Julian Betts, "What Happens When Schools Become Magnet Schools?" *American Institutes for Research*, (May 2015).

desegregation can lead to targeted stereotypes, particularly against African American and Hispanic students, often in the form of microaggressions²³ or other comments which can limit the confidence of those groups and cause them to underperform in mixed environments. When mixed-race and mixed-income schools are artificially desegregated, stereotyping increases, particularly as a result of backlash in districts that had previously been predominantly white.²⁴

Not only do these desegregated schools not provide the benefits they promise, but often such schools do not remain desegregated, and instead amplify the problem by creating majority-minority local areas. After desegregation policies are enacted, wealthy families often respond to the changing demographics in their schools by moving outside of the school district to wealthier, more homogenous, predominantly-white areas such as suburbs where the schools cannot be affected by desegregation policies. As a result, poorer families, unable to move into better districts, are once again trapped in underfunded, poorly-performing low-income schools. This white flight intensifies the problems of low-income education as not only entire schools but entire school districts empty of wealthier families. As a result, the number of high-poverty, predominantly African-American and Hispanic schools has more than doubled since 2000 despite widespread deconcentration efforts. This perpetuates the racial and economic segregation in cities throughout the United States, creating cycles of poverty that are closely linked to these problems of education. The funds that governments allocate towards deconcentration efforts are clearly wasteful, and in many cases cause more harm than benefit to low-income students.

²³ Microaggressions are sometimes-unintentional insults and dismissals of minority groups, particularly comments which may seem innocuous to those that perpetuate them but can have serious psychological impacts on their recipients. Less overt than openly-derogatory comments, microaggressions are particularly problematic because they rely on prejudiced assumptions and are rarely called out in social settings.

²⁴ Warren Berger, "Who is Entitled to Ask Questions in Class?" *A More Beautiful Question: The Power of Inquiry to Spark Breakthrough Ideas*, (New York: Bloomsbury), 2014.

However, because our education system, particularly on the federal level, rewards districts with higher test scores, it is tempting for lawmakers to enact such policies even with the knowledge that they are not the most effective solutions. The No Child Left Behind policy passed in 2001 mandated the use of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) incentives, which schools can either pass or fail. Failing schools are often penalized with sanctions which perpetuate this cycle of failure and defunding, and schools are forced to further cut “non-essential” programs, such as art and music, that do not directly improve students’ chances of performing well on AYP metrics. As a result, state politicians as well as district and school officials are incentivized to dissolve schools in or on the brink of this cycle of failure, and promote school desegregation as a way of ensuring that all schools have a high enough proportion of wealthier students to allow them to meet AYP standards. Similarly, Title I, a long-standing federal program to improve low-income education, awards basic grants to schools in which 10% of children come from low-income families. In order to maximize the amount of funding received from Title I, it is in the interests of districts to deconcentrate low-income students so as many schools as possible meet the threshold of 10% and are eligible for these grants. Once these grants are applied, the districts are at liberty to use the funds as they see fit. Reducing the weight of these standardized test scores in school evaluation would be a huge step towards implementing policies that are focused purely on improving the lives of low-income students.

c. Community Programs

The most promising solutions to the opportunity gap fall under the category of community-based initiatives and enrichment programs, which aim to improve test scores by providing services to improve the wellbeing of low-income students and their families. Community programs include food distribution, after-school care, extracurricular activities, and additional music and art education. The rationale behind these programs is that by improving the conditions of schools and communities for low-income students, as well as making school a more well-rounded and enriched experience, low-income schools will be able to provide the same educational benefits and opportunities as wealthier schools and communities without the harms associated with desegregation policies. These initiatives are often popular among low-income parents as well as their communities, and have shown to have positive effects on school performance and the wellbeing of residents low-income areas more generally. However, such programs are not without issues, as they can fall prey to internal corruption or simply be cancelled due to the lack of available funding or appropriate funding distribution.

Most low-income schools focus on providing remedial instruction aimed at improving language and math ability, a mindset encouraged by the heavy reliance on standardized tests to evaluate educational achievement. However, this approach has not proved effective, as factors such as food security and parental involvement continue to affect the performance of students in such schools. Schools that reduced recess time in favor of more classroom hours, for example, actually showed a decrease in performance and school engagement.²⁵ By contrast, schools and districts that adopt structured, committed approaches of community and enrichment programs yield a considerable increase in test scores after instituting these changes. Central Elementary

²⁵ Karah Mantinan, "Cutting Recess Isn't The Answer To Higher Test Scores," *Altarum* (Oct. 8, 2013).

School in Hartford, Connecticut was one of such schools—while the scores of both low-income students and wealthier students at Central improved, the increase was particularly sharp for low-income students, as their proficiency rate nearly doubled from 31% to 60% over five years after the program was implemented.²⁶ Enrichment programs have been shown to not only improve test scores but to provide psychological, neurological, and social benefits to students as well.²⁷

Community-based programs are particularly effective for low-income children because they can create more equal playing field with wealthier students who do not have to worry about necessities like food and transportation. For example, school-based food assistance programs provide low-income students with three meals a day when they would otherwise have fewer, a benefit which can increase educational achievement and engagement.²⁸ Such programs can also provide students with more nutritious food options than they can obtain at home, which also improves their wellbeing.²⁹ In addition to students and families, broader communities benefit from these programs; in turn, these stronger and healthier communities can positively impact student performance as community members help to support schools. Ravenswood School District, for example, provides services like free laundry machines to the community, which allow parents to spend money usually reserved for laundry on other necessities like clothing and food.³⁰

²⁶ Margaret Beecher and Sheelah M. Sweeny, "Closing the Achievement Gap With Curriculum Enrichment and Differentiation: One School's Story," *Journal of Advanced Academics* 19, no. 3 (2008).

²⁷ Rikki Hullinger, Kenneth O'Riordan, and Corinna Burger, "Environmental Enrichment Improves Learning and Memory and Long-term Potentiation," *Neurobiology of Learning and Memory* 125 (2015): 126-34.

²⁸ Mary Ellen Flannery, "After-School Programs Prove Key to Closing Gaps," *neaToday* (Jan 31, 2011).

²⁹ Food and Nutrition Service, "Food Distribution Programs," *USDA* (Washington, DC): Feb. 2017.

³⁰ Betty Yu, "Peninsula School District Installing Washers, Dryers To Help Frazzled Families," *CBS SF Bay Area* (Aug. 9, 2017).

However, some of such programs, including Ravenswood's free laundry facilities and food pantry, have come under fire for falling prey to corruption and ineffective leadership. Critics of community initiatives can point to numerous examples of programs which fail to reduce the equity gap or improve the scores of low-income students. The vast majority of these struggles illustrate the fundamental difficulty with instituting such programs—the lack of funding designated for them. Because many community-based programs are not necessary in wealthier schools, low-income schools must receive more funding than wealthy schools in order to effectively implement such programs. The failure of segregatory policies illustrates that this funding must be directed in ways that ensure the students reap the benefits of it, and community programs are the most promising policy in this regard. The question remains about how to find this money.

Although community programs are shown to be effective in the majority of cases, allocating money towards low-income schools for this purpose often faces steep resistance from wealthy communities. The expense of such programs often requires additional funding which is not delivered to wealthier schools which do not have the need for these benefits, causing a funding imbalance in favor of low-income schools. Limited state budgets often require this additional funding to be generated from property taxes of neighboring wealthy communities; however, wealthy parents still seek to improve public schools in their own districts, so although they may in principle support additional funding for low-income schools, in practice they are unwilling to adopt propositions under which their property tax dollars are used to fund initiatives that do not provide benefit to their own children. The example of Willow Oaks School and Laurel School once again illustrates this divide. The area around Laurel School is one of the

most liberal in the nation, and its residents generally support increasing government funding for schools in low-income areas. However, the district has repeatedly voted against measures that increase funding for Willow Oaks' district at the expense of their own schools. Without a major mindset shift among the wealthy and middle-class, this disparity between intention and action is unlikely to change, so practically funds for community programs must come from elsewhere.

Another natural source for this money is the federal government, which already spends billions of dollars on improving low-income schools. However, the pressure from federal incentive programs to meet test score standards disincentivizes districts from funding community-based programs because they do not directly cause an improvement in test scores (although they often do indirectly). If federal funds were successfully and reliably allocated towards community programs and enrichment opportunities for low-income children, significant progress towards reducing the equity gap could be made. Because the structures of current federal grants and incentive programs like Title I and No Child Left Behind do not incentivize this use of funding, new federal regulations for funding low-income schools must be enacted which ensure the allocation of funds towards community programs that directly benefit the wellbeing of children, and the government must provide oversight to ensure such programs are well-structured and thoughtfully designed. In this way, the government can avoid wasting money on ineffective policies and instead focus funding on programs that can make a real positive impact on the lives of low-income students.

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