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Escape From Poverty for a Few More Students Is Not a Worthy National Goal

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The 1954 Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court decision provided a catalyst to advance but not fully achieve racial and economic justice. Sixty years later, Republicans and Democrats alike continue to talk about race, poverty and education. However, in current education policies there is a gulf between proclamations of intent and real effects. The rhetoric has shifted from condemning *the soft bigotry of low expectations* and *leaving no child behind* to declaring that education reform is *the civil rights issue of our time* and initiating competitions to *race to the top*. The marketing

phrases have changed, but the purported goal has remained constant: “escape from poverty.” Unfortunately, there is a glaring omission in most of the debate and reporting about the relationship between improving education and poverty. Ironically, the missing piece is a key outcome goal in new standards: Use evidence to support logical arguments.

Integration has largely evaporated as a key driver in the struggle for equity. It has been replaced by the idea that education is the most effective anti-poverty program. The argument is framed by the following ideas:

A high-quality education offers the best path out of poverty and into to the middle class. The new and improved, common-core aligned, standardized tests will accurately reflect the differential levels of student learning in areas that matter for their own future and that of the nation. Students who perform poorly on these assessments are unlikely be very successful in their post-secondary college and career endeavors. As a result, they are headed for low paying jobs or unemployment. Therefore, if we can increase their performance on these tests they will be more likely to succeed and escape poverty.

This argument, while simplistic, sounds reasonable and appealing. However, close examination reveals that it is not evidence-based, nor is it logical.

No promoters of education policy would publicly claim that their improvement strategies are designed to impact just a few children. Instinctively most Americans would dismiss such a goal as small and unfair. Therefore, the evaluative standard for education policies must be whether evidence suggests they have the promise of widespread improvement. It is on this point that the evidence and logic for current education policy fails most miserably. There are many problems with the logic chain in this prevailing theory of action, but I'll address the just final one. The logic about escape from poverty only works on the individual level. While individuals are certainly better off with the best possible education, there is no evidence that attaining a significantly increased percentage of high achieving students would eliminate the need for people to clean our offices, homes and hospitals, stock our store and warehouse shelves or serve us in fast food restaurants. There is no evidence that that employers will suddenly agree to pay such better-educated workers a living wage that would enable them to provide adequate food, clothing and shelter so that poverty would cease to exist.

Maybe, more effective teaching will increase the size, diversity and creativity of the nation's knowledge workforce, who will subsequently spur innovation and new kinds of well-paying employment for others. Maybe, our superior innovation capacity will offset the competitive advantage of lower wage countries. These would be good outcomes, but they will not end poverty. Unless, we commit to real high-quality universal health care, food and housing security, and full employment at fair living wages for all (through, for example public investment in infrastructure improvement), it is illogical to believe that universally high-quality education will significantly reduce, much less end poverty. Imagining that it will do so represents magical, not evidence-based logical thinking.

At best, more effective instruction and school-level organizational management will make the chance to escape from poverty a slightly fairer competition among individuals. Such improvements would, of course, be terrific and we should pursue them vigorously. Great teaching matters, but there is no evidence that on a systemic level improved instruction can break the causal link between poverty and students' ability to engage in and sustain learning. There is no evidence that competition among teachers for merit pay will offset the resource advantages of schools in wealthy districts. There is no evidence that competition among schools for students improves overall school effectiveness. As long as there is poverty, it will cause family instability. As long as there is poverty, it will be detrimental to the developmental, social and psychological health of children and, as a result, constrain their learning. Exceptional anecdotal stories aside, this is true everywhere in the world. Imagining that six or seven hours in a classroom for 180 days of the year will avoid these negative impacts at a systemic level is either blindly delusional or purposefully obfuscating.

If answers on Common Core assessment questions require supporting evidence, it is only fair that evidence-based reasoning should be an expected feature of public education policy. Apparently such consistency is not required when it comes to political decisions. Sadly, too many policy makers seem more committed to enabling profiteering from the results of poverty than ending it. The testing industry is an excellent example. Education policies sanction and encourage multi-billion dollar testing and test preparation corporations that enable destructive punishment and rewards for educators, gaming the system and sorting of students for competitive access to an increasingly unaffordable post secondary system that perpetuates inequity. State and federal education policies support costly, overly stressful and time consuming high-stakes testing in order to verify and detect small differences within the very large socio-economic disparities we already know exist.

Well-designed large-scale assessments can contribute evidence for institutional and program level judgments about quality. However, we do not need to test every student every year for this purpose. Less costly sampling can accomplish this goal. I am not opposed to qualifying exams—*if* they validly and reliably measure qualities that are directly applicable to their purpose without bias. However, imagine if we shifted the balance of our assessment attention from the summative to the formative. Then we could focus more on becoming better at interpreting daily data from regular class work and use that evidence to help students move their own learning forward. Imagine what else we could accomplish if we spent a significant percentage of our current K-12 and college admission testing expenditures on actually mediating poverty instead of measuring its inevitable effect. Imagine the educational and economic benefit if we invested in putting people to work rebuilding our cities, roads, bridges, schools and parks. Imagine if we put people to work building affordable housing instead of luxury high rises. Imagine the boost to personal spending and the related savings in social service spending if a living wage and full employment prevailed. Imagine the learning benefit to children if their families did not have to worry about health, food and shelter. Imagine if our tax policies favored the common good over wealth accumulation for the 1%ers.

Such investments are far more logical than the current over-investment in testing and compliance regimes. Education, race and poverty are inextricably intertwined. Let's do everything we can to improve teaching and learning. More students learning to use evidence to support arguments would be terrific. But, if we want to do something about poverty we need to ensure good jobs at fair wages for the parents of our students. That is where evidence and logical thinking lead.

At least since the adoption of No Child Left Behind legislation education reform has been promoted as an anti-poverty program and a way to narrow the racial achievement gap. Maybe that appeal is a good sign about the conscience of US citizens. Apparently, many people still believe that the connection between educational achievement, race and socio-economic status is unfair. However, no policy makers have been forthright enough to reveal or admit to themselves their real underlying logic: *We have given up on ending or seriously mediating poverty. The best we can do is to give some kids who are willing and able to work hard a better chance to make good. That is why we support school choice.* No one will say this out loud because it sounds so pessimistic and cynical.

Maybe it is time to hold policy makers accountable in their own behavior for what they demand of students: *At least be clear about your hypothesis, experimental design and collect appropriate evidence.* That would allow the public to participate in deciding whether escape from poverty for a few more students is a worthy goal that represents our values as a nation.

We are better than that.

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