

Structural Inequality: The urgent need to move from education for some to education for all

Children living in poverty in the United States experience the results of structural inequality as they pass through the classrooms of America's schools. They may enter pre-school and kindergarten wide-eyed and open to learning, but their educational experiences seldom lead to higher achievement, a richer life experience, or the possibility of preparation for future employment. The odds of these students attending college are far outstripped by the possibilities of diminished opportunities anchored in illiteracy, lack of self-efficacy, hopelessness, despair, and criminalization (Children's Defense Fund 2007; National Center on Education and the Economy 2007). In a time when college or technical school is essential to the ability to participate in the United States economy and/or the global economy, these students struggle to learn how to read, to do simple mathematics, in essence, to gain those basic skills that would assist them in high school matriculation and graduation.

These issues are so significant that there must be an all-out collaborative effort and partnership to make the systemic changes that are imperative. All Americans must be involved in the change, beginning with the President of the United States. The needs of our children must be our primary focus. This partnership must include members of Congress, governors, commissioners, school superintendents, school administrators, and teachers. It must include major organizations such as African American leadership organizations, as well as deans and presidents of colleges and universities. This initiative must include those universities that serve underrepresented minorities, like the historically black colleges and universities, and other institutions that represent children of color and children living in poverty. The focus of this paper is the discussion of key data points that illustrate the urgency we face, and the declaration of what we believe to be the position that should be taken by our government, politicians, business leaders, educators, community groups, and general citizenry on the education of our children.

*All Americans
must be involved
in the change,
beginning with the
President of the
United States.*

End Structural Inequality

The Time Is Now!



It is time to recognize and accept that education should be a civil right in this country. It is time to speak out and to demand that we ensure that our children's civil rights are protected. It is time to challenge the status quo, demand and ensure that America's children's civil rights are protected. These civil rights include learning to read. The fulfillment of the Declaration of Independence and our Constitution depend upon an educated population. There are nearly nine million students in grades 4-12 in the United States "whose chances for academic success are dismal because they are unable to read and comprehend the material in their textbooks" (Kamil, M. 2003). We cannot continue to have a situation where "in international comparisons of performance on reading assessments, U.S. eleventh graders have placed very close to the bottom, behind students from the Philippines, Indonesia, Brazil, and other developing nations" (Kamil, M. 2003).

Invest in Human Capital

The Time Is Now!

The greatest wasted resource in America is our human resource. America is losing a large productive capacity and squandering human capital that is desperately needed to restore our place in the global economy. Our leadership in the world is threatened! We must restore our place as a world leader by educating those in our own country whose fortunes are denied by structural inequality, while simultaneously engendering a new competitive nature in our institutions through the creation of a world-class educational system. In the past, students from all over the world came to our shores to be educated at our great universities. We produced global leaders who received their baccalaureate and graduate degrees from American universities. That prestige is now being threatened with students from great nations like India and China choosing to seek their educations elsewhere (Friedman, T. 2005, Pink, 2006).

At the same time, many students within our country are not graduating from high school. They are opting for stunted futures, denying the possibilities of productive adult lives and income because they do not see the value in pursuing an education. Many feel that the public schools offer nothing of interest to them and provide little hope for future employment.

The Alliance for Excellent Education estimates that if the 1.2 million high-school dropouts from the Class of 2007 had earned their diplomas instead of dropping out, the U.S. economy would have seen an additional \$329 billion in wages over these students' lifetimes. And that's only for one year—the country can expect to lose well over \$300 billion in potential earnings next year as well, due to dropouts from the Class of 2008. If this annual pattern is allowed to continue, more than 12 million students will drop out of school during the next decade at a cost to the nation of more than \$3 trillion (“Impact on American Society”, 2008. www.all4ed.org).

If this annual pattern is allowed to continue, more than 12 million students will drop out...

Other students in more affluent communities feel entitled to lives of plenty based on little of their own effort. Some students in these high schools, often graduating at the top of their classes and being accepted into some of our finest colleges and universities, admit that they have not put in too much effort and have a limited work ethic. These behaviors and attitudes are in sharp contrast to those of students in nations that represent our global competitors (“Two million minutes”: A documentary. 2007. Silicon Valley, California: Broken Pencil Productions).

Face the Facts

The Time Is **Now!**

There are ample data indicating the effects of structural inequality in education in this country. Examine the following:



- In 2003-2004, more than half of African American males did not graduate from high school with their classmates (cohort) (Smith, 2006, pp. 2-9).
- Large urban districts in which African American males attend school are more racially segregated now than ever before (Orfield, 1999, p. 3; Smith, 2006).
- Disproportionate suspensions, expulsions and other disciplinary actions for African American males continue to occur, generated from “one size fits all” discipline policies (Smith, 2006, p. 12).
- Special education classes are full of African American males who have been placed and retained disproportionately (Smith, 2006, p.12; Edelman, 2007).
- Some of the worst neighborhoods in terms of poverty for children can be found in the following (diversitydata.org, 2000):
 - For Blacks: Buffalo, Chicago, and New York
 - For Hispanics: Bakersfield, Providence, and Springfield
 - For Asians: Bakersfield, Fresno, and New York
 - For Whites: Bakersfield, El Paso, and New York
- Top ten states with high failure to graduate black males and close the achievement gap are:
 - Wisconsin
 - New York
 - Illinois
 - Indiana
 - Michigan
 - Florida
 - Nevada
 - Nebraska
 - Ohio
 - Pennsylvania

(Smith, 2006, p. 2)

Actively Change Conditions in the Nation's Schools

The Time Is Now!

Conditions

What are the conditions that must be in place for this country to educate children of color and children of all races living in poverty?

Effective Early-Childhood Programs

We must provide effective early-childhood programs to children living in poverty. These programs, beginning with pre-kindergarten, must be instituted nationwide so that our children are given the background preparation for school readiness, including oral language development, literacy skill development, basic character education, and instruction on how to operate in a school environment

Rigorous Instructional Programs and Expectations for Student Achievement

We must engage our students in rigorous, thought-provoking teaching and learning experiences from the beginning of their school days, while teaching them the necessary and fundamental foundational skills. We must strengthen the U.S. high school curriculum so that it is academically competitive with the highest-achieving nations and meets global standards.

Restructure Teacher Preparation

We must educate teachers in a manner that equips them to deal with the content they must teach and methods for teaching it effectively to the children who are the neediest. All teachers must be highly trained in their disciplines to address the needs of African American and Hispanic males and other youngsters living in poverty. Restructuring teacher preparation to include schools of education and arts and sciences working together to design programs to achieve this end is essential.

*We must strengthen
the U.S. high school
curriculum so that
it is academically
competitive with the
highest achieving
nations...*

Establish Equitable Funding of Schools

We must focus on the funding issues in U.S. schools and the inequitable distribution of resources. This will involve decoupling funding tied to property values and will require the creation of a realistic funding formula that meets the requirement of all schools, those in wealthy communities with high property values and those in neighborhoods where poverty is a dominant characteristic.

Design a Study to Address Graduation Rates

We must focus our attention on the ten lowest-performing states, those states where the graduation rates are dismal for African American students and students living in poverty. In order to clearly define the issues, we must design a three-year study to analyze classrooms where the greatest gains are being made for African American students and those classrooms where the biggest losses are occurring. Ultimately, we must use the findings from this study to address the issues of students in every state of our nation.

Require Responsibility and Accountability from Political Candidates and Government Officials

We must have responsible and accountable political candidates and government officials. To this end, we must develop an understanding of the presidential candidates' educational platforms, and provide an analysis of the gaps and the critical levers needed to achieve substantive change to accelerate the educational goals for undeserved students. We must hold all candidates accountable for their educational plans. In fact, we must hold all government officials responsible and accountable for education in this country. We must ensure that government officials operate from an informed, scientific approach to education and are not just responding to the pressure of lobbyists in Washington.

Moral Imperative

We must proclaim the moral imperative needed to correct the structural inequalities that exist in the education systems of the United States of America. The time is now!



Statement of the Moral Imperative

We believe that it is a moral imperative that all children living in the United States, no matter where they live, what color they are, their ethnic, religious, or linguistic backgrounds, have a fundamental civil right to an education that will lead to their becoming productive citizens in the 21st-century global environment.

We believe that this is the time to end the structural inequality that has relegated children into categories of “haves” and “have-nots”, and time to focus on making sure that children get what they need to succeed by distributing funding equitably and providing them with teachers who are educated and prepared to teach students, no matter who they are, where they live, or whether they are rich or poor.

We believe that it is time for government officials, political candidates and those in the highest offices of the land, including the President, to put our national interests above all partisanship.

We believe that our national interests lie in the development of human capital.

We believe that our children are our human capital.

We believe that our success in the 21st-century global environment depends on the education of our children so that they can carry forward this great nation as it was intended to be.

*We believe that
our success in
the 21st-century
global environ-
ment depends on
the education of
our children...*

References:

- Acevedo-Garcia, D., et al. (2007). *Children left behind: How metropolitan areas are failing America's children*. Cambridge: Harvard School of Public Health: Center for the Advancement of Health.
- Draper, T. (2007). "Two million minutes": A documentary. Broken Pencil Productions. Silicon Valley, CA.
- Edelman, M. (2007). *America's cradle to prison pipeline: A report of the Children's Defense Fund*. Washington, D.C.: Children's Defense Fund.
- Friedman, T. (2005). *The world is flat*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus & Giroux
- Heller, R., and Greenleaf, C. L. June 2007. *Literacy instruction in the content area: Getting to the core of middle and high school improvement*. Washington, D.C.: Alliance for Excellent Education.
- Kamil, M. (2003). *Adolescents and literacy: Reading for the 21st century*. Washington, D.C.: The Alliance for Education.
- Knapp, C., and Tucker, M. (2007). *Tough choices or tough times*. Washington, D.C.: National Center on Education and the Economy.
- Orfield, G., Yun, T. (1999). *Resegregation in American schools*. Cambridge, MA.: The Civil Rights Project, Harvard University.
- Pink, Daniel. (2006). *A whole new mind*. New York, NY.: The Berkley Publishing Group: Penguin.
- Smith, R. (2006). *Public education & black male students: The 2006 state report card*. Boston, MA.: Schott Foundation for Public Education.