

# **The Future of Educational Inequality in the United States:**

**What Went Wrong, and How Can We Fix It?**

**by Adam Gamoran**

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**Education is a gateway for opportunity—a pathway to progress through which young people acquire the skills, knowledge, and experiences to obtain good jobs and prosperous futures. Yet in the U.S., education is highly unequal. On average, students from minority backgrounds, immigrant origins, and economically disadvantaged families leave school earlier, receive fewer degrees and certificates, and exhibit lower academic skills than their more privileged peers (Gamoran, 2001). To address these inequalities, we need research that identifies effective responses to the challenges that give rise to unequal opportunities and outcomes. Indeed, education is one of the key domains in which the William T. Grant Foundation has focused its efforts to support research on reducing inequality.**

## **My Forecast for the Future of Educational Inequality**

Not long ago, I thought I had a good sense of the future of educational inequality in the United States. In an article in *Sociology of Education* (2001), I offered two predictions for educational inequality in the 21st century. First, following a trend established during the 20th century, I argued that racial inequality in educational achievement and attainment would greatly diminish. Second, also following 20th century trends, I anticipated no change in socioeconomic gaps in educational outcomes for the young people of this country.

### **Why did I think racial gaps would shrink?**

I was not alone in my optimism about the future of racial inequality. In a 2003 majority opinion allowing some forms of affirmative action in education, for instance, Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor declared that, "25 years from now, the use of racial preferences will no longer be necessary." Justice O'Connor's statement implied that within a quarter century, racial inequality would diminish to the point that preferences would no longer be needed to produce equal outcomes. My prognosis was not quite that optimistic, but I did foresee that racial achievement gaps would contract to near zero during the 21st century, and predicted a continued narrowing of gaps in years of schooling and degrees obtained.

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During the last third of the 20th century, racial achievement gaps had become much smaller, especially during the 1970s and 1980s, and black-white differences in high school graduation were nearly eliminated. These advances, I postulated, would result in a “virtuous cycle,” in which the improvements of one generation would engender even further progress in the next (see also Mare, 1995). A virtuous cycle contrasts with the more familiar, “vicious cycle,” in which undesirable conditions spiral into even worse outcomes. The contrasting idea here is that success in the past lays a basis for even greater success in the future. By 2010, I reasoned, it should be possible to detect whether the virtuous cycle were in play: by that time, the children of those who completed their schooling in the 1980s would be moving through the school system themselves.

I was not completely naive about what it would take to sustain this cycle. I recognized that a laissez faire approach, in which progress “just happens,” would not be enough to turn past progress into future success. But I thought that sufficient momentum had been established that the trend would continue.

### **Why did I think socioeconomic gaps would be preserved?**

In contrast to the decline witnessed for racial gaps in educational outcomes, differences by socioeconomic background had varied little during the course of the 20th century. Of course, education had greatly expanded: persons from all economic strata were staying in school longer. But the relative differences between groups were preserved. Sociologists refer to this as a process of “maximally maintained inequality,” (Raftery & Hout, 1993) a process whereby privileged groups take advantage of expansion to promote the interests of their children and maintain relative advantages over less privileged groups. An expanding pie can serve as a metaphor for maximally maintained inequality: as the pie expands, everyone’s piece of pie gets bigger, but the relative differences between the slices are preserved.

Against the backdrop of the civil rights movement, racial gaps declined during the 20th century, but comparable political mobilization in defense of the rights of poor people has not occurred in the U.S. Moreover, unlike racial categories, which are constitutionally protected, poverty or low income is not a protected class under the U.S. constitution. For these reasons, there seemed little basis at the time of my forecast to anticipate any change in socioeconomic inequality in educational outcomes.

### **Recent Trends Contradict My Forecast**

How does my forecast look in light of recent trends? Focusing first on educational attainment, Figure 1 draws on census data as reported by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (Snyder, 2014) to monitor gaps in college enrollment immediately after high school. “College enrollment” refers to any postsecondary institution, including community colleges and for-profit colleges. This is an important indicator because those who proceed to college immediately after high school are more likely to earn degrees than those who delay enrollment (Roksa, 2012).

The lower line in Figure 1, marked by squares, reflects the trend for percentage point differences between blacks and whites from 1975 to 2010. The upper line, indicated by circles, displays differences between those young people whose parents were in the lowest 20 percent of household income, compared to those in the top 20 percent. The figure reveals a substantial decline in black-white inequality, from a high of about 20 percentage points in 1980 to less than 5 percentage

points in 2010. The trend since 2000, which exhibits a slight rise initially, has subsequently plunged, just as I had predicted. By contrast, the trend for socioeconomic differences has been largely stable since 1975, and precisely flat since 2000—also conforming to my predictions.

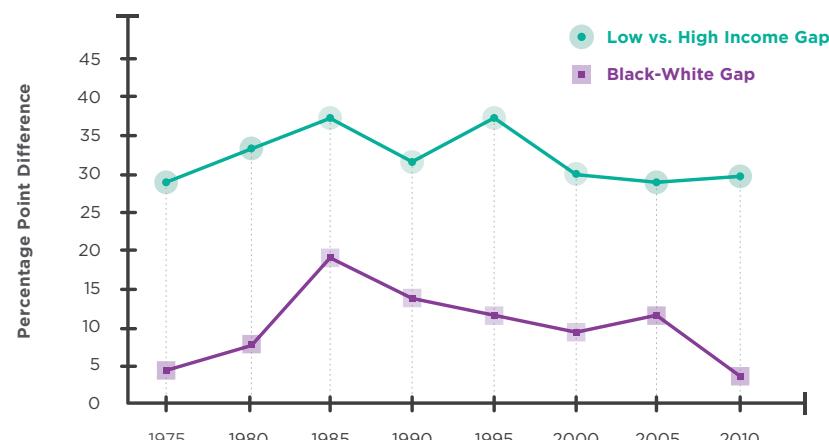
It is worth noting that the growth of community colleges and non-selective four-year colleges are important to these

figures (Roksa et al., 2007). The trends do not necessarily indicate that blacks and whites or those from high- and low-income families are attending the same college programs. But the decline in the black-white gap, as contrasted with stable socioeconomic differences, is noteworthy, and may reflect the social conditions I described.

Other indicators of educational attainment, however, do not make me look so prescient. Figure 2, for example, depicts recent trends in the black-white gap in high school and college completion. Although the gap in high school completion has declined, the gap in college completion has grown.

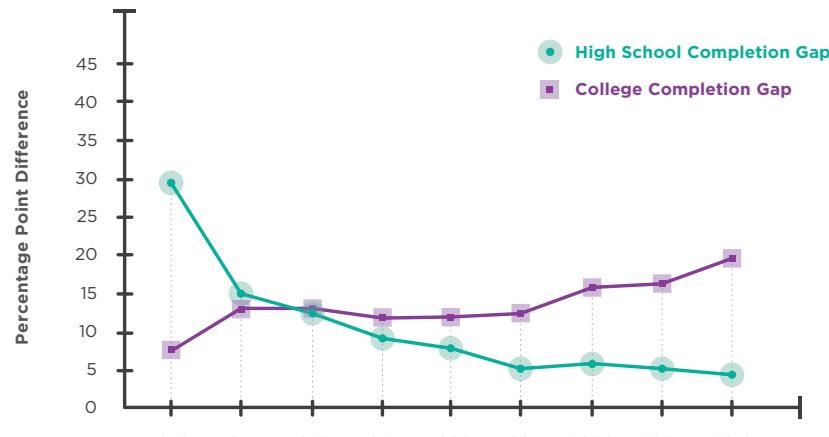
Also drawing on census data reported by NCES (Snyder & Dillow, 2013), the line marked by circles in Figure 2 signifies changes in the black-white gap in high school completion. A sharp decline during the 1970s and 1980s has been followed by a more muted downward trend since that time. Indeed, the trend since 1995 is essentially flat, as the downward slope since 2000 has simply allowed the gap to return to the point it had reached in 1995. Still, the overall picture for racial gaps in high school completion is one of declining inequality in the late 20th century and into the 21st. By contrast, black-white inequality in the percentage of young people completing college has increased.

**Figure 1: Gaps in College Enrollment Immediately After High School, 1975-2010**



Note: Figures are three-year moving averages. Source: Digest of Education Statistics 2013, Tables 302.20 and 302.30.

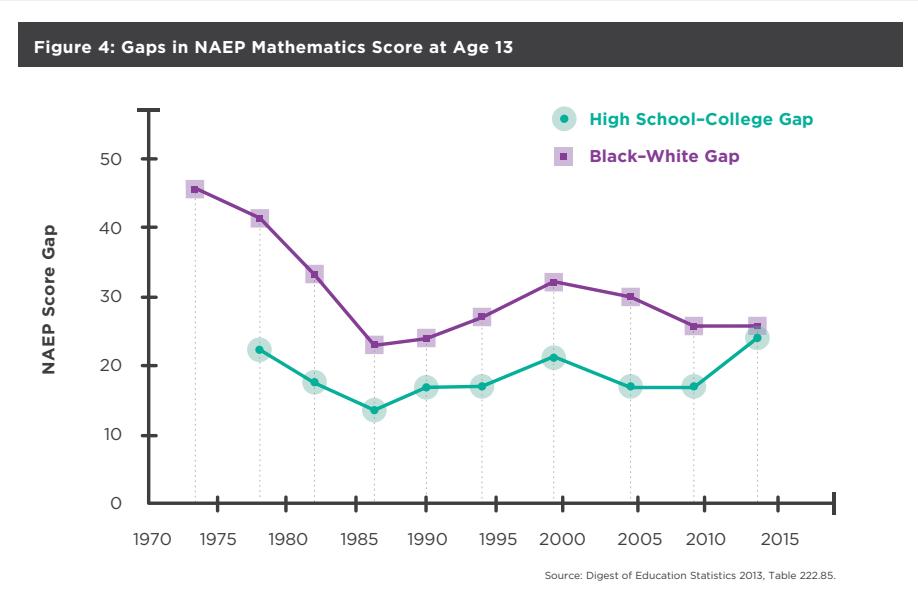
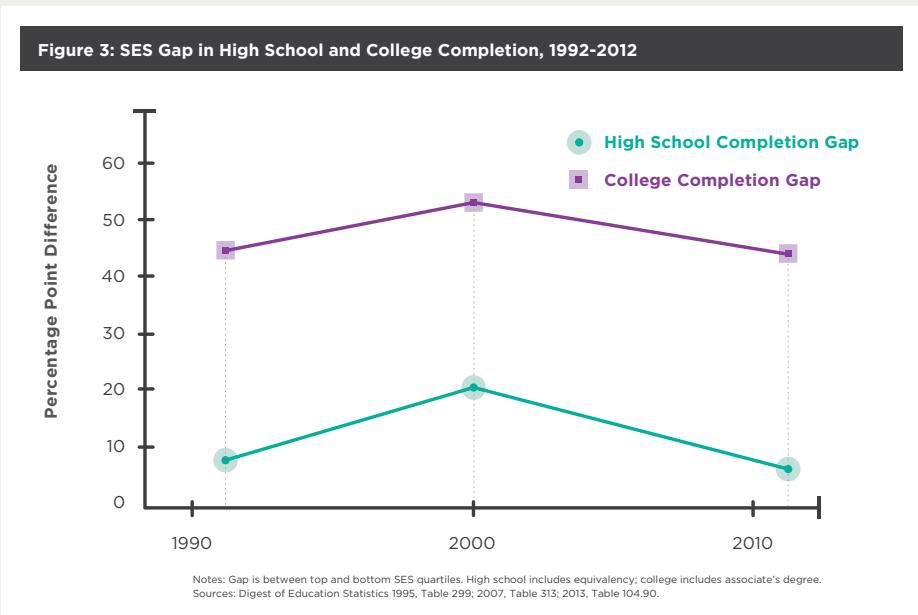
**Figure 2: Black-White Gap in High School and College Completion, 1970-2010**



Source: Digest of Educational Statistics, Table 221.85.

The trend of declining high school completion gaps followed by a rise in college completion gaps, depicted in Figure 2, is perhaps not surprising in light of maximally maintained inequality theory. This is because the population of those who are eligible to enroll in college becomes more heterogeneous as high school graduation becomes more common. Within that eligible population are some who are well prepared to complete college, and others who are not. In this sense, the time period between 1975 and 1995, when high school completion gaps dropped and college completion gaps held steady, is one of remarkable success. Unfortunately that is a success of the past, as current trends show an alarming increase in college completion gaps, contrary to my prediction of a virtuous cycle.

Public reports on socioeconomic gaps in high school and college completion are less common, but a compilation of NCES reports (Snyder, 2014; Snyder, Dillow, & Hoffman, 2008; Snyder & Hoffman, 1995) reveals trends in the gap between those in the top socioeconomic quartile and those in the bottom quartile, as represented in three successive national surveys: high school sophomores in 1980, 1990, and 2002 followed up ten to twelve years later in 1992, 2000, and 2012, respectively. As seen in Figure 3, these gaps were stable overall, with increases during the first period countered by declines in the second time period.



Turning to educational achievement, Figures 4 and 5 display trends in the National Assessment of Educational Progress, a test given approximately every four years to random representative samples of students in a number of subjects, most consistently in mathematics and reading (Snyder, 2014). Figure 4 shows the trends for 13-year-olds in mathematics: since 2000, a slight decline in

the black-white gap—not even sufficient to overcome an increase that occurred since the smallest gap was evidenced in 1986—and, more recently, a steep climb in the gap between students whose parents completed high school compared to those whose parents completed college. The results are similar in reading, as witnessed in Figure 5. The black-white gap has declined recently, although it is still not as narrow as it was in 1988, and the most recent assessment (in 2012) shows a larger gap than the previous one (in 2008). The high school-college gap in reading, meanwhile, has fluctuated, but is now larger than it was in the 1990s. Thus, the achievement trends contradict my predictions, in that the black-white gap, at best, has declined more slowly than I anticipated, and the socioeconomic gap (as represented by parents' education) has, unfortunately, gotten worse (see Reardon, Robinson-Cimpian, & Weathers, *in press*, for similar findings with gaps calibrated in standard deviation units).

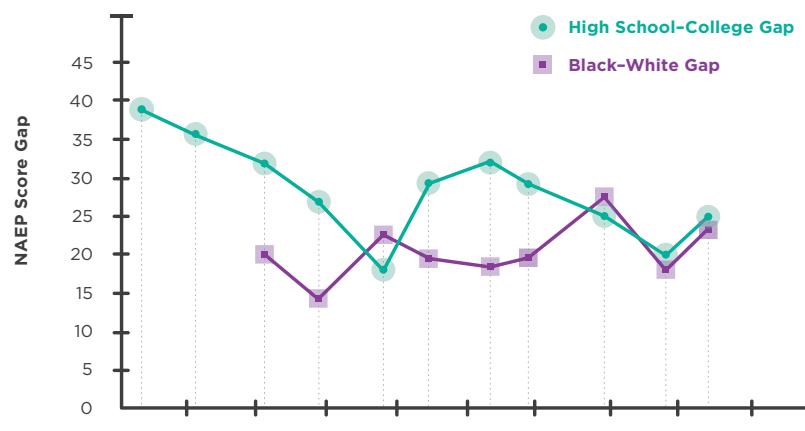
### Summary of Trends

Overall, the trends contradict my predictions more than they confirm them. Although black-white gaps in high school completion and college enrollment have narrowed, the gap in college completion has widened. Test score gaps have narrowed slightly, but far more slowly than I (or Justice O'Connor) anticipated. And while socioeconomic gaps have remained steady in some areas, such as attainment, they have widened in others, particularly achievement.

### What Happened to the Virtuous Cycle?

Past trends suggested that children would benefit from educational improvements in their parents' generation. According to this argument, increased education among parents would lead to higher income and occupational status for their children—a virtuous cycle that would culminate in the decline of black-white inequality in education. Advantages in the parents' generation, that is, would result in higher educational expectations, better access to high-quality instruction, and other benefits, ultimately leading to greater educational achievement and attainment, and prolonging the cycle for the next generation. Yet, as of 2015, the evidence shows that black-white gaps have declined slowly at best. What has gone wrong?

**Figure 5: Gaps in NAEP Reading Score at Age 13**



Source: Digest of Educational Statistics, Table 221.85.

### Summary of Trends ..... in ..... Educational Inequality

- » Black-white gaps in high school completion and college enrollment have narrowed, but the gap in college completion has widened
- » There have been modest declines in racial achievement gaps
- » Socioeconomic gaps have remained steady in some areas (attainment) and gotten worse in others (test scores)

**What lies behind these trends?**

## A Breakdown in the Virtuous Cycle

Two important social conditions have prevented the virtuous cycle from operating as anticipated. First, increasing levels of education and other socioeconomic gains have paid off less well for blacks than for whites. Second, mass incarceration, which has disproportionately affected African-American males, has counteracted the advantages of prior gains. In both cases, larger structural forces have presented the virtuous cycle from operating as I had anticipated.

### Poor payoff from increased education

Expressing skepticism about my optimistic predictions for racial inequality, Alexander (2001) commented that blacks were unlikely to reach parity in educational outcomes with whites, even as their socioeconomic conditions improved, because increasing parental education contributes less to the test scores of African-American students than it does to those of white students. He elaborated this argument by documenting racial gaps in test scores within socioeconomic bands, finding the largest gaps within the highest socioeconomic levels (Gosa & Alexander, 2007). In response, two colleagues and I examined this issue in great depth, with attention to black-white gaps in educational attainment (Long, Kelly, & Gamoran, 2011). Could we detect a virtuous cycle in play, in which educational upgrading in one generation contributed to narrower gaps in the next? We could not. On the contrary, educational attainment of parents contributed 16 percent less to the educational attainment of their children among blacks as compared to whites. This differential has become greater in recent decades, and it holds for all levels of schooling: high school completion, college enrollment, and college completion. But why does educational upgrading pay off less well for blacks than for whites? Four explanations seem most compelling:

- » Complexities in the tabulation of high school completion rates
- » The significance of wealth inequality
- » Differences in school or teacher quality
- » Persistent segregation in a larger context of racial prejudice and discrimination

First, indicators of high school completion need to be interpreted with care. For example, although black-white high school completion rates have converged, gaps in on-time completion, i.e., graduation within four years, have not narrowed as quickly (Mishel & Roy, 2006). Because on-time high school completion is an important predictor of postsecondary education, those who complete high school within four years and those who take longer are not really equivalent in their educational and occupational prospects. Moreover, the convergence of high school completion reflects, in part, a higher rate of GED attainment among blacks than among whites (Mishel & Roy, 2006), yet the GED does not boost economic outcomes to the same degree as a high school diploma (Tyler, 2004). Furthermore, the usual statistics on high school completion may overstate the rate for blacks because the surveys typically omit incarcerated individuals, among whom blacks are overrepresented (Petit, 2004). For all these reasons, the near-disappearance of the gap in high school completion may be illusory.

A second reason that investments in human capital (i.e., more schooling) have not yielded the same benefits for blacks as they have for whites is that, in the U.S., it takes financial capital to make human capital pay off fully. Family wealth (i.e., economic assets such as money and property) enhances a young person's chances of enrolling in and completing college (Conley, 2001). Among blacks and whites,

even when parents' education, occupation, and income are equal, wealth tends to be unequal, due to our nation's long history of discrimination (Conley, 2009; Oliver & Shapiro, 2006). Consequently, even when a gain in family background boosts educational outcomes, it may not boost them all the way along.

Two additional reasons for the breakdown of the virtuous cycle relate to the persistent school and residential segregation of African Americans. Due to the sorting of teachers between schools and within schools, African-American students tend to encounter teachers with weaker credentials and experience than their white counterparts (Desimone & Long, 2010; Kalogrides, Loeb, & Beteille, 2013; Oakes, 1990; Phillips & Flashman, 2007). Moreover, even as African-American families have reached the middle class, they remain more likely than middle-class whites to remain in segregated neighborhoods with low-income neighbors (Massey & Denton, 1998; Pattillo, 2013; Sharkey, 2013). As a consequence, African-American parents are unable to pass along the full benefits of their educational and occupational accomplishments to their children.

#### The consequences of mass incarceration

Another important trend, which was already evident at the turn of the millennium, but whose importance I did not recognize at the time, is the dramatic increase in incarceration rates in the U.S., in which African-American males are dramatically overrepresented (Neal & Rick, 2014). Imprisoned individuals complete less education themselves, and their children are often placed at a disadvantage. The children of incarcerated fathers, particularly African-American boys, experience relatively poor cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes (Haskins, 2014). Moreover, mass incarceration has likely contributed to the increase in single-parent families among African Americans which, on average, further disadvantages their children (Haskins, 2014). As a result, the virtuous cycle has not just stalled, but shattered.

#### Growing educational inequality by socioeconomic origins

Meanwhile, educational inequality by socioeconomic origins has worsened in the last decade, particularly as measured by test scores. Several conditions may lie behind this trend. First, increasing income inequality in the U.S. means that those from high- and low-income bands are farther apart than ever (Piketty, 2014; Reardon, 2011). As a result, the advantages of wealth and the disadvantages of poverty

**New Directions for Research**

**Featured Resource**

John Laub explores the intersections of inequality, crime, and the justice system in *Understanding Inequality and the Justice System Response: Charting a New Way Forward*, and looks at promising directions for future research.



for educational outcomes become heightened. Second, many U.S. cities have experienced increased concentration of poverty amid growing residential segregation by income (Reardon, 2011; Sharkey, 2013). Consequently, young persons growing up in economically disadvantaged families are increasingly likely to be found in disadvantaged neighborhoods, which may impair their progress (Sharkey, 2013). Moreover, recent trends in how parents invest in their children show that, although parents at all economic levels are investing more now than in the past, rich families are increasing their investments at a faster rate, so that the gap has widened over time (Kaushal, Magnuson, & Waldfogel, 2011; Putnam, 2015). For example, Putnam (2015) traces the amount of time per day that parents typically spend in “developmental care,” such as reading to their children. Whereas the number of minutes spent in these activities was roughly comparable in the 1970s for parents who were high school graduates as compared to college graduates, and the figures have increased for all groups, by 2013, college graduates were spending one and a half times the amount of time, nearly 45 minutes more per day, than parents whose schooling was limited to high school. These conditions may well lie behind recent increases in test score gaps between children from more educated and less educated parents.

## New Directions for Inequality Research

At the William T. Grant Foundation, we make a four-point case for supporting research on reducing inequality among young people in the United States (Gamoran, 2014). First, inequality is excessive. This point is evident in comparisons of the U.S. to other nations, and in comparisons of the U.S. to itself in the recent past (Gamoran, 2013). Second, excessive inequality is economically and socially harmful, as it drags down our productivity, breaks down social cohesion, reduces civic participation, and ultimately undermines our democracy (Putnam, 2015). Third, rising inequality is not inevitable. Despite claims to the

contrary, notably those of Piketty (2014), that increasing inequality is an inexorable companion to the growth of capitalism, our own history and that of other nations reveals many occasions and arenas in which social policies have quelled the growth of inequality (e.g., Bailey & Danziger, 2013). Fourth, new research can identify policies that will reduce inequality, and reduce the effects of inequality in this generation on the outcomes of the next. Although we do not know everything about what generates inequality, we propose that enough is known to build a body of evidence on potential gap-closers.

### Four Points about U.S. Inequality

1. U.S. inequality is excessive, whether in comparison to other countries at the present time, or in comparison to the past history of our own country.
2. Excessive inequality is economically and socially harmful: it is a drag on economic productivity and is socially divisive.
3. Inequality responds to social policy and is not inevitable.
4. We need research to identify the policies that will be effective in reducing inequality, and in reducing the effects of inequality in this generation on the outcomes of the next.

The potential array of responses to inequality is vast, and we do not have all the answers about which steps will be most effective. Rather, we call on the research community to make the case for specific programs, policies, and practices that, if undertaken, would reduce inequality for young people in the domains that affect their future economic and social success, and along dimensions such as economic background, racial and ethnic minority status, and immigrant origins (Gamoran, 2014). It should be clear, moreover, that the challenges of racial and socioeconomic inequality in education cannot be fully addressed without attending to the larger social structures that have prevented past advances from

turning into future gains. Discussions now underway to pull back from mass incarceration (Haskins, 2014) and to invest in neighborhoods (Putnam, 2015; Sharkey, 2013), as well as to enact tax policies that advance opportunities for the poor and middle classes instead of hoarding opportunities for the wealthy (Smeeding, 2015) have the potential to lead in this direction. With that said, existing research and experience point to a number of approaches within the education system that may help reduce unequal outcomes. Among these are new directions in standards-based reform, variation among states as natural laboratories for reform, local programs examined via research-practice partnerships, and efforts to scale up evidence-based innovations.

### **Standards-based reform**

At the federal level, standards-based accountability has been the main approach to reform since 2002, and it has had some success: one might attribute our greater awareness of educational inequality to the No Child Left Behind Act's requirement to report achievement separately by demographic group (Gamoran, 2007). The modest drop in test score gaps may also be a consequence of greater focus on students achieving below standards (Dee & Jacob, 2011). Yet the standards-based approach has fallen far short of its goals to improve outcomes and reduce gaps (Gamoran, 2007; 2013).

The era of No Child Left Behind has passed, but efforts persist to improve educational outcomes by raising standards and holding schools—and now, teachers—accountable for results. The lynchpin of current efforts is the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), which specifies performance goals intended to set students on a course for “college and career readiness” by the time they finished high school (McDonnell & Weatherford, 2013). Grounded in research showing that higher standards leads to elevated performance, CCSS implementation has the potential to reduce inequality by raising minimum performance levels for low-achieving students, particularly in states with relatively low standards prior to CCSS. Yet there are reasons for concern about how CCSS may affect inequality. Inconsistent implementation of CCSS, a reflection of resource constraints as well as controversy over assessments tied to the standards, may undermine efforts to use higher standards to drive improvement efforts. Research on the implementation of CCSS, and particularly on whether and how the standards affect classroom instruction for disadvantaged students, could shed light on whether new directions in standards-based reform are likely to be more successful than past efforts in reducing inequality.

### **States as natural laboratories**

As nearly all states have obtained waivers from the most burdensome elements of No Child Left Behind, we have moved from a single, federal accountability system to as many as 50 separate, state-level accountability systems (Gamoran, 2013). This may be problematic for leveraging improvement, but it is a boon to researchers, for whom variation is essential for insight. More generally, differences in policy environments across states offer a valuable opportunity for examining which policy efforts exhibit the greatest success for improving performance and reducing gaps. Coupled with emerging policy variation is a vast new data resource available at the state level, consisting of longitudinal data systems that make it possible to track changes in performance levels over time. Today, researchers are well positioned to examine the effects of variation, both among states and within states over time, to understand how differences in policies related to accountability, choice, and teacher development, among other areas, may affect educational inequality.

## **School district partnerships with researchers**

At the local level, partnerships between school districts and university-based researchers hold promise as vehicles for identifying approaches to reducing inequality that are effective in a particular context and that have a chance to be implemented in the district. As Turley and Stevens (2015) have explained, districts commonly lack the capacity to carry out research despite the large volume of data they routinely collect, and they can benefit from the enhanced capacity and increased credibility of external research on their programs. Meanwhile university-based researchers benefit from the partnerships by having access not only to valuable data, but to questions whose answers could make a real difference to educational decision makers. Such research-practice partnerships are emerging in major cities across the U.S., where the need for reducing unequal outcomes is particularly great (Turley & Stevens, 2015). New insights about reducing inequality in large urban districts will not answer all the important questions about inequality in U.S. education, but they would go a long way toward addressing our most important challenges.

## **Scaling up successful local efforts**

Despite the lack of progress on reducing inequality overall, a number of approaches have had demonstrated success in specific cases, such as healthy parenting, high-quality child care, small classes in the early elementary grades, social psychological experiments for adolescents, and financial aid assistance for college students, among others (Gamoran, 2013). To reduce inequality nationwide, programs, policies, and practices that work in targeted cases will need to be scaled up and implemented

more widely. But research on implementation is in short supply, and approaches that work in one context often fail in another. Class size reduction, for example, which raised achievement and reduced gaps in the early elementary grades when implemented in Tennessee, failed to achieve the same success in California (Ehrenberg et al., 2001). Similarly, technology-based mathematics instruction achieved notable successes in targeted studies, but yielded little impact in a national study

(Campuzano et al., 2009). To respond to these challenges, researchers will need to attend not just to the effects of programs and policies, but to the contexts in which such efforts take place. In other words, research is needed that moves beyond “what

### **New Directions for Research**

In *The New Forgotten Half and Research Directions to Support Them*, James Rosenbaum and colleagues discuss the obstacles that lead nearly half of community college students to drop out before earning a credential, while putting forth an agenda for new research.

### **Featured Resource**



works” to what works for whom and under what circumstances (Gamoran, 2014). Weiss, Bloom, and Brock (2014) have provided a framework for research on variation across contexts in program effects, and studies that pursue this approach may help us apprehend how to implement programs in ways that yield success in diverse contexts.

## Conclusion

It seems like hardly a day goes by without a new report on inequality in the news. In January 2015, a Gallup poll discovered that two-thirds of Americans are dissatisfied with how wealth and income are distributed in our country (Riffkin, 2015). And as inequality has emerged as a major issue in the 2016 presidential campaign, Democrats and Republicans alike are crafting messages in respond to public concerns (Lauter, 2014). Indeed, inequality has become a signature issue for leaders at all levels, especially on the U.S. national scene. Earlier this spring, Janet Yellen, Chair of the U.S. Federal Reserve Bank, declared that “economic inequality has long been of interest within the Federal Reserve System” (2015). Her comments struck close to home for us, as a Foundation committed to using research to find responses to social problems:

Research may be able to provide evidence on which public policies are most helpful in building an economy in which people are poised to get ahead. Conversely, it would also be beneficial to understand whether any policies may hold people back or discourage upward mobility.

Which policies, however, are likely to yield positive results for reducing inequality in education? This essay has pointed to two key directions for the future. First, inequality in education substantially reflects conditions outside the education system, such as residential segregation, employment discrimination, and inequality in the justice system. In *Our Kids*, for example, Putnam (2015) points to a range of responses to support families, communities, and labor market access as well as school improvement as avenues to provide opportunities for social mobility across the U.S. population. If education is truly to serve as a gateway to opportunity, these impediments to realizing the full benefits of increased education must be overcome. Second, efforts to reduce gaps in educational outcomes that have been successful in targeted cases will need to be implemented and examined in larger efforts. As an example, the U.S. Department of Education’s Investing in Innovation (i3) program is allowing for dramatic expansion and rigorous testing of education programs with strong evidence of success (Haskins & Margolis, 2014). The success of more targeted strategies demonstrates that inequality can be addressed and that it is not an impossible challenge.

What changes might make it possible to recapture the optimism for greater equality that I expressed in 2001? A realistic appraisal of successes and failures in reducing inequality by race and socioeconomic background is a good first step. It must be followed, however, by new insights on improvement efforts, which we hope will come from the research that we and others are supporting, and then by a commitment of resources to implement efforts that have been shown to work, in specific contexts and with particular populations. This will require a will to action that has been rare in American politics, but given the widespread interest in addressing inequality, the present may be an auspicious time.

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## New Directions for Research

### Featured Resource

In *Inequality Matters*, Stanford University professors Prudence Carter and Sean Reardon outline the role that research can play in reducing inequality and reframe the issue as one that is broader and deeper than poverty alone.

