

Gauging the Quality of Education for the Impoverished Student: A National Reality

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Abstract

Undergirding the tenets of American democracy and underpinning the historical frameworks and proven best practices for educating all U.S. schools is the notion that equity of access is fundamental and central to performance across all schools with strong teaching and quality leadership being central to the closing achievement gap for all students. This article pairs a snapshot of historical data drawn from a research study conducted in the context of the Greater Houston area in 2011 on student performance in high-poverty schools with recent national research and data surrounding educational trends focused on the miseducation of impoverished minority students in U.S. schools in a country whose founding principles lie in the realization of endless opportunities for all.

Introduction

A 2011 doctoral dissertation entitled, *An Investigation of the Impact of the Impact of Atypical Principal Preparation Programs on School Accountability and Student Achievement in High-Poverty Schools* (Miller, 2011), espouses that that education is the gateway to opportunity for impoverished students. Similar to national trends around substandard education for poor minority students, the Texas and Greater Houston (Harris County) public school landscape painted a grim picture for the future of many of its students based on data captured as part of a 2011 research study designed to gauge the impact of leadership on student achievement outcomes for students in high-poverty schools. The notion that true school reform in urban public schools must take place for all students with emphasis on providing equitable access to a quality education for the minority student in vastly different ways than our country has historically done still remains a key priority if the ideals of equity for all is to be realized.

Historical research across the Greater Houston and Texas region revealed that children living in low-income families tend to have a greater risk of dropping out of school prior to graduating. A review of the 2010 *Demographics of Low-Income Children Report* found as part of the National Center for Children in Poverty's archival website that the landscape of Texas families in 2010 included a total of 3,472,355 families having 6,607,575 school-aged children (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2010). Of this number of school-aged children, 23% percent lived below the Federal Poverty Level compared to a national level of 19%. The same report also revealed that 48% of students in Texas or 45% in Harris County were living in low-

income families at that time (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2010).

Being one of the largest cities in America, Table 1 depicts trends between 1998 through 2008 on the number and percentage of Harris County’s school-aged children from 0-17 living below the federal guidelines for sufficient income (Children at Risk, 2009). Table 1 highlights the variance in low income children in Houston over a ten-year period with demonstrated growth.

Table 1

Children at Risk Demographics of Low-Income Children in Harris County (2009)

Year	1998	1999	2000	2002	2003	2004	2006	2008
Children in Poverty	190,778 (20.2%)	192,163 (19.6%)	191,074 (19.1%)	208,200 (19.9%)	228,966 (21.7%)	244,526 (22.9%)	259,986 (23.5%)	263,413 (23.0%)

Purpose of the Article

Public schools serve as extensions of the democratic tenets the United States was founded on and play a key role in shaping the manner by which quality public education is realized as it lays the foundation for preparing students for post-secondary success, career and life. Schools are designed to provide all students irrespective of learning gaps or when they are identified; an equitable education such that students matriculate through schools internalizing key academic skills based on attainment and mastery of Common Core Standards paired with soft skills to prepare students for high-performance in post-secondary spaces, career programs and life as contributing citizens. Absent a quality education, urban minority students are indirectly sentenced to a life of missed opportunities and the continual cycle of generational poverty based on race, class and socio-economic deficits based residential zip code or school locale.

The simple ideal that equity of access should negate any supposition that race, class, social status or school location would undermine the highest tenets of all that is achievable in the space of equipping students with the fundamental skills and knowledge required to have a fighting chance for future opportunity in work and life. The stark reality however paints a dismal picture of a national education system where equity of access to high-yield equitable opportunities for all remains a distant hope for as it relates to the impoverished student and those of color. The purpose of this article is to compare the landscape of educational trends in one of the largest cities in America in 2011 with that of recent research centered on progress made in U.S. schools’ quest to provide equitable access education for all students in its schools regardless of race, class or socio-economic status. Standardized student testing data in 2011 from the Greater Houston area also provided mounting evidence that a correlation between poverty and lower cognitive achievement existed, and that economically disadvantaged students often earned below-average scores in reading, math, and science and tended to demonstrate poor writing skills (Miller, 2011). More recent research focused on the correlation between race, class, socio-economic status and student performance extends and supports earlier sub-study of one urban city and state, with new evidence highlighting the impact changes in U.S. demographics has on achievement gaps for minority students in American schools.

Across the United States, Black and Hispanic students are more likely than their white or

Asian-American counterparts to live in low-income, racially segregated neighborhoods and attend schools with high concentrations of low-income students. As more minorities rest in underperforming public schools, trends indicate far greater racial and ethnic segregation being present. Research reveals that ever evolving growth of minorities being educated in underperforming schools in poor communities can be identified as a contributing factor to changes in the achievement gaps between whites and other racial and ethnic minority groups. While the effects of poverty cannot be measured to a science, researchers reveal the implications for students in poverty often set in motion a vicious and stubborn cycle of low expectations, including subpar academic performance (Reardon & Yun, 2001; Orfield et al., 2014).

Poverty, coupled with other identifiable labels, categories, classifications, and punitive measures of exclusion superimposed upon minority were also identified as a contributing factor in a vicious cycle of missed opportunities and generations of undereducated adult citizens in the United States (Miller, 2011). Identifiers outlined in the study included: the economically disadvantaged student, the at-risk student, alternative education programs, the Limited English Proficient (LEP) student, Special Education, and the high school drop-out. The origination of many of these identifiers and/or programs was grounded with the full intent to provide systems of support for minority students and was created to level the “playing field.” However, research clearly demonstrates that the minority student has been overwhelmingly impacted and limited by many of these well-intended identifiers and programs. To compound these issues, inequitable funding in minority schools and districts has created a challenging landscape for those who educate the minority student. Research spanning the course of thirty-years reveals that social class and racial segregation with concentrated students of low socio-economic status in schools often experience achievement gaps between race and ethnicity (Coleman et al., 1996).

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) serves as the main data source for U.S. trends in mathematics and reading achievement for individual students with different characteristics, for schools with different student populations, and, since 1992, for sufficiently consistent samples of students and schools within states. A review of national trends reveals a major increase in students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch since the inception of the test with more than a 75% increase in poor students in U.S. schools from 2003 to 2013 (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2020).

Social class in the United States as it relates to school sub-categories of identification has long been based on economic prowess or the lack thereof. A student is classified as being economically disadvantaged if the student is eligible for free or reduced priced lunch meals under the National School Lunch and Child Nutrition Program based on the classification of having a family income at or below the federal poverty line, being eligible for Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, or other public assistance (Texas Education Agency, 2010).

According to yearly demographic data provided by the Texas Education Agency in a 2009-2010 electronic report, there were 512,473 economically disadvantaged students in Harris County, comprising 63.2% of the school population in Houston with 23% of all school-aged children living in the state of Texas were classified as living below the poverty level with even more children classified as economically disadvantaged based on key indicators (Texas Education Agency, 2010). As Harris County has become more diverse with black and brown students becoming larger majorities in schools, the levels of poverty in schools also increased. A *Children at Risk* report revealed trends in economically disadvantaged students in Harris County highlighted fourteen years of data centered-around students in Harris County public schools with an ever-growing increase in poorer students attending Houston schools (2010).

Table 2 highlights the growth in disadvantaged students in Harris County.

Table 2

Children at Risk Trends in Economically Disadvantaged Students in Harris County (2010)

Year	1990-91	1994-95	1998-99	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04
Indicator	33.8%	42.5%	49.8%	52.5%	54.0%	55.6%	56.9%

History has demonstrated the interrelatedness between race, poverty, and education deficits for children of color. As a result of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision and the civil-rights laws passed in the 1960s, actions were taken to bridge the gap between white and black. In spite of this sweeping legislation, the gap between rich and poor has continued to grow, with most negative impact on nonwhites, including fractured educational opportunities for Hispanic, non-native English-speaking students who have entered the U.S. education system.

Recent national trends reveal that disadvantaged minority children, identified primarily as African Americans and Hispanics are much more likely to be poor than are white children (DeNavas-Walt & Proctor, 2015). The correlation between poverty and school performance has been studied broadly, with an ever-increasing population of black and Hispanic students being educated in poor schools. A 2017 Economic Policy Institute article entitled, “Five Key Trends in U.S. Student Performance” derived from the *Segregation and Peers’ Characteristics in the 2010–2011 Kindergarten Class: 60 Years after Brown v. Board of Education* study espoused:

We show that as the overall proportion of poor students in schools increased from 2003 to 2013, the percentage of both black and Hispanic students in high-poverty schools rose substantially. We also show that Hispanic students are as or more likely than white students to attend high-poverty schools. (Carnoy & Garcia, 2017)

While the study found inconsistent evidence that achievement gaps for blacks and for Hispanics in high-poverty schools were increasing at the time it was written, there was evidence to support achievement gap increases between those blacks and Hispanics who attended schools with a high concentration of black plus Hispanic students versus those who do not.

Concluding Remarks

Attending schools with higher concentrations of poor minority students has and continues to have a negative effect on the achievement levels of these students as compared to their white counterparts’ achievement and performance levels. Despite recent early trends of closures in performance gaps between some groups in a few subject areas, much more work and intentionality is required on creating equitable systems, providing access to quality teaching, targeted remediation, wrap-around supports and having strong leaders in every school with a passion and skill set for leading urban schools. The imperative for continued emphasis on school reform in underserved communities with poor minority students is paramount paired with a targeted focus on teacher and leader preparation, support and continued development to address

the many challenges of leading urban high-poverty schools. If the United States truly desires to live into the tenets of American democracy underpinned by providing equitable access to a high-quality education to all students irrespective of race, class, socio-economic status, or location of the school, far more work is needed in legislation and state and district offices to address funding inequities, resource allocation, staffing models and targeted supports for urban students.

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